with even a passable performance. The American business world is full of rosy projections and enthusiastic estimates. The government and various associations hand out awards and citations for excellence like so many Christmas cards. It's a rare American who doesn't have on his wall at least one Certificate of Excellence, whether in Management, Salesmanship, or Best Attitude.

Every American bookshop has shelves and shelves of self-help books. Titles such as I'm OK, You're OK; Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy, and The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, an incomprehensible field guide for success-seeking business people, top the nation's bestseller lists. The New York Times Book Review gives such books their own bestseller list so they won't crowd out the real books.

Elementary schools focus on teaching children self-esteem, urging them to feel good about their accomplishments (even if such accomplishments don't include the ability to perform long division without a calculator). Many schools have stopped giving spelling tests because many of the children couldn't get all the words right and the resulting failure damaged their confidence, i.e., made them feel bad.

Insecurity

The dark side of American cheerfulness is the undercurrent of insecurity and depression that drives much of the country's commerce and nearly all of its psychiatry. Deep down, Americans are deeply fearful, pessimistic, and unhappy. They feel inadequate to meet life's challenges.

They're afraid they will lose their jobs. They're afraid that after working so hard, someone — whether the government through taxes or a thief through force — will take the things they value away from them. They take every peril personally. They're afraid their children will grow up to become criminals, pornographic film stars, or, worse still, politicians. They're afraid that eating raw oysters will kill them, that their neighbours make more money than they do, that they have cancer.

If they are single they're afraid they will never get married, if married they're afraid they will get divorced, if divorced they fear they will never meet anyone attractive ever again. To prevent these dire events Americans move to the suburbs, install car alarms, buy insurance, avoid shellfish, go into therapy, join clubs for singles, and see marriage counsellors. Often this only makes the anxiety worse by bringing sufferers into contact with people who have the same problem.

Being depressed is unattractive and thus not suitable for public display. The preferred reaction is treatment, either with drugs or psychotherapy or both, and concealment. If pressed about his or her state of mind, an American will admit, "I was pretty anxious about the situation at first, but I'm sure everything will be OK."

When seeing each other off on a journey, Americans will say "Have a safe trip". The travellers will have updated their wills and made sure the insurance is current, because you never know what can happen.

It's a Conspiracy

Americans see conspiracies behind every event, from the Kennedy assassination to the worldwide spread of AIDS. After all, things don't just happen by chance, do they. Someone must be pulling the strings.

Who really runs the world? A conspiracy, obviously. Opinions differ as to whether it involves the Illuminati or the Trilateral Commission, or possibly the Catholic church, but the underlying paranoia remains the same.
But That Was Last Week

In some countries, disgraced politicians kill themselves. In America they run for office. The American public has a short collective memory. Thus, Richard Nixon, the only U.S. president ever to resign under threat of impeachment, became an elder statesman in his later years on the strength of his China policies. Marion Barry, the mayor of Washington, D.C., was jailed for drug use in 1989. Four years later he ran for his old office and was elected by a safe margin. One mayor of Boston was re-elected while he was in jail. In Florida, Judge Alcee Hastings was removed from office for corruption by the U.S. Congress. His home town promptly elected him as a representative to that august body.

Behaviour

Family Values

Conservative politicians in particular like to natter on about family values. The problem is that in America nobody is exactly sure what that means. The divorce and illegitimacy rates are high, homosexual couples are having and adopting children in greater numbers, and nearly a third of Americans live alone anyway.

Marriage in the United States tends to look more like serial monogamy than lifetime partnership, especially in the major cities. Just under half of all marriages end in divorce. However, this statistic is misleading: many people, such as Elizabeth Taylor Hilton Wilding Todd Fisher Burton Burton Warner Fortensky, marry repeatedly, but three-quarters of Americans who marry for the first time stay that way. The others go through several spouses before settling down. And approximately 10% of men and 6% of women never marry at all.

When Americans say ‘family’, they mean a nuclear family of Mom, Dad, and the kids. That such households are melting down at a prodigious rate doesn’t affect the cultural ideal one iota.

Another component of the ideal family is a non-working wife, the caring, nurturing mother who greets children after school with a plate of home-baked cookies. Such women, when they do exist, are nearly extinct. More than 80% of women between the ages of 35 and 45 are employed outside the home for the simple reason that they need the money. The children go to day care nurseries or stay with a relative or neighbour; when they’re old enough, they go to school and to after-school care. Working parents, especially those in demanding careers, must console themselves by spending ‘quality time’ rather than quantity time with their children.

Children are raised to be independent and cautious, with a strong sense of self-esteem. American parents treat their children with a near-deference unheard of in most European households: “Would you like Froot Loops or Captain Crunch for breakfast? Is that enough milk? OK, I’ll put it into the teddy bear bowl instead.” Child culture, in the person of Big Bird and Barney the Dinosaur, invades the home and takes over the conversation and the television, and child activities dominate evenings and weekends. Homework is often minimal, so the children have plenty of time to watch television.

It is difficult and expensive for parents to get a babysitter because local teenagers are probably working at McDonald’s. Thus American parents take their children to all sorts of functions such as cocktail parties, the cinema and weddings.

Children are raised in as risk-free a manner as possible. Along with his or her first bicycle, an American child also
receives a safety helmet. The government continually tests toys to make sure they can't cause harm even when used inappropriately; gone are the days of home chemistry sets and slingshots. School athletics has switched from American football to the less violent soccer, while insurance liability has removed high-diving boards from community pools.

On the other hand, in many areas teenagers are given a car as soon as they are old enough to drive (usually 16). The insurance payments are astronomical, but since there's little public transportation it saves hours every day for mothers. Such cosseted, protected children grow up into perfect Americans — self-centred, self-assured, competent, cheerful, and eager to try something life-threatening now that their parents are finally off their backs.

The Perpetual Teenager

For many Americans the best years of their lives were in high school — the years between 15 and 18. Teenagers have few responsibilities, plenty of disposable income, and lots of energy with which to have fun and get into trouble. Americans never outgrow this stage, continuing to indulge themselves and dodge responsibility right into senility.

Given his choice, the American man wants to be a sports star like basketball wonder Michael Jordan or football quarterback Joe Montana. (It doesn't hurt that both these gentlemen are rich.) You can see weekend athletes on playgrounds all across the country, shooting baskets and pretending they could have gone professional if they hadn't had to earn a living.

American women yearn to be film stars or models, and spend their weekends shopping for cosmetics to make them look like Cameron Diaz or Tyra Banks. They also yearn for a domestic fantasy, and dream about redecorating the guest bathroom, making needlepoint chair-covers, and 'putting up' quarts of home-canned tomatoes. Martha Stewart, a television personality with her own magazine, has earned a fortune telling American women how to iron their sheets, grow their own salads, and make dried flower wreaths. Virtually no women actually do these things. For many Americans, fantasising about their own potential is a full-time activity.

Sex

Whatever kind of sex it is they're having, Americans know that it could be better. Books about improving one's sex life top the sales charts, and women's magazines in particular feature at least one How to Have Better Sex article every month. Nowadays it's OK to be open about sex.

But being open isn't the same thing as being relaxed. Americans retain a strong prudish streak. Public nudity is illegal in most states, and at the beach bathers wear suits that provide at least a minimum of decency, particularly men, who wear shorts that contain three times the amount of fabric in the average European swimsuit. Topless and nude beaches are rare, and going topless at a public beach makes one subject to arrest. (On the other hand, women in New York City have won the right to ride the subway topless if they so choose.)

Adultery is widely practised but publicly condemned. The American cultural ideal, which bears no relationship of any sort to American cultural reality, is a monogamous marriage between two virgins. In America, one should never admit to adultery, much less having enjoyed it. Political figures in particular are held to very strict
standards of marital fidelity, in spite of the fact that they are among the least likely to observe such conventions. Cries of outrage are heard when an affair is discovered and it is universally assumed that the spouses will immediately divorce. But the most vicious scorn of all is directed at couples who choose to stay married: “How can she/he stay with him/her after what he/she did?”

All this sex doesn’t mean Americans feel that they know what they’re doing. Contraceptives, once relegated to the back of the counter at pharmacies, are now sold everywhere from petrol stations to newsstands, but conservative parents have long opposed school-based public sex education programmes on religious grounds. As a result, many Americans are surprisingly ignorant of the basic mechanics of reproduction. This is a main reason for America’s high teenage pregnancy rate.

Sex is a particularly touchy subject at work, where even a hint of sexual harassment can bring on a damaging lawsuit. Garage mechanics can no longer post calendars with photographs of nude women, and supervisors who tell racy jokes to their secretaries are endangering their careers. However, Americans are finally getting around to admitting that attitudes towards sex differ between men and women, and researchers have recently traced this disparity to biology. Thus, a wandering husband can now offer the defence, “I can’t help it, honey. It’s genetic.”

Manners

Americans are intrigued by good manners, in part because they don’t have any. In the past few years middle-class parents have realised that their children not only don’t know which fork to use at a formal dinner but rarely use a fork at all. It seems beside the point that this is due in large part to the fact that said children are eating most of their meals at fast-food restaurants with their friends instead of around the family table.

Manners are back, up to a point, and etiquette schools do a brisk trade in educating young savages in the niceties of proper behaviour, American-style. However, manners have had to adapt to a number of situations hitherto unthought of. How does one introduce one’s son and his live-in male companion? What role does the stepfather of the bride play in the wedding ceremony? Should a woman introduce her children to her new boyfriend on the first date?

Americans manage to combine an overall public rudeness with heartfelt concern for others’ welfare. They talk too loudly, chew with their mouths open, cut each other off at intersections when driving, and take the last doughnut without a second thought. Yet they are generous to charities, kind to animals, and concerned about the welfare of the poor.

Many of the variations in American public behaviour are regional. Urban New Yorkers are chatty but brusque, giving them the reputation for being intrusive and rude, whereas the friendly Midwesterners can take so long to get to the point that it takes a half an hour to buy a bar of soap.

Smoking

Americans mind if you smoke, they mind very much, and not being a shy race, they will frequently let you know just exactly how much they mind. In certain areas of the United States, being a smoker is not only personal but social suicide.

Smoking is now something of a class indicator, separating the workers from the management. A country honky-tonk bar reeks of tobacco, but in the Ritz-Carlton lounge
it's a sure bet that any smokers will be German or Japanese tourists or tobacco company executives planning how to diversify their holdings.

I'm Late, I'm Late!
Like Alice’s White Rabbit, Americans (particularly big-city Americans) run around in a frenzy of worry over what time it is. This doesn’t mean they are prompt; far from it. Americans tend to run late, particularly if they’re important or wealthy. Powerful Americans guard their time jealously and charge handsomely for it. Lawyers bill their clients in six-minute increments and if an executive earning $80 million a year spends two or three minutes on pleasantry, he’s tossing thousands out the window and knows it.

Sense of Humour
Americans have a strong taste for slapstick in various forms, and substitute riposte and banter for irony or whimsy, which they tend not to understand.

Because everyone has ancestors, family and friends of every possible race, colour, creed and national origin, and because sensitivity to such differences has reached unprecedented tenderness in recent years, it is considered rude to tell a joke that perpetuates an ethnic, social, religious, sexual, or racial stereotype. Pat and Mike, Rastus and Festus, the drunk priest, the Polish bridegroom, the silly blonde — all are now off-limits, at least in public. That still leaves plenty of material for humour, such as occupation, political persuasion, or region of origin. For example, a Texan was boasting to an Arkansan about his ranch. “Why, my ranch is so big,” he said, “that if I start out in my truck in the morning to drive around it, it’s night by the time I get home.” The Arkansan nodded understandingly and said, “Yep. I had a truck like that once.”

The only group detested enough to be a suitable butt for barbed humour is lawyers. Lawyers are unpopular because they’re only consulted in times of distress, such as during divorces, negligence suits and second-degree murder defences. Any lawyer joke is sure to draw a laugh. Some lawyer jokes are specific:

Q: Why don’t sharks bite lawyers?
A: Professional courtesy.

Q: Why does Arizona have lots of vultures and Washington, DC have lots of lawyers?
A: Arizona got first choice.

Did you hear that medical laboratories have started using lawyers instead of white rats? There are more of them, researchers don’t get as attached to them, and there are some things even a laboratory rat just won’t do.

Others are merely old ethnic jokes adapted to the needs of the target:

Q: What do you have when you have two lawyers buried up to their necks in sand?
A: Not enough sand.

Politicians are also fair game, but since approximately two-thirds of the nation’s congressional representatives are law school graduates, such jokes are really just a subset of the ‘lawyer’ canon.

Perhaps the most characteristic expression of American humour is the snappy retort. A classic example comes from comedian Jack Benny, famous for his parsimony. A
criminal pointed a gun at Benny and said, “Your money or your life.” Benny hesitated a few moments and answered, “I’m thinking, I’m thinking.”

Obessions

The American Image
There are a few, a very few things that Americans condemn as being beyond the pale. They include growing old, being fat and dying.

Growing Old
There is nothing more antithetical to the American ideal than growing old. The cultural message for both men and women is ‘Look 20 years younger’. Old people, who are called seniors, fight the man with the scythe by dyeing their hair, wearing blue jeans, and having their faces lifted and their tummies tucked. Perhaps the definitive American remark on aging was made by Ivana Trump, who said, “I’ll always look 35, but it’s going to cost Donald a lot of money.” (It didn’t work. He dumped her for a younger woman, but she got the kids and the Plaza Hotel.)

Being Fat
An American socialite once said: “You can never be too rich or too thin.” All Americans crave to be svelte (and rich). This doesn’t mean the average person is thin; far from it. At any given moment fully 30% of all women are on a weight-loss diet and another 50% are clinically obese. However, rich women are thinner than the non-rich, as perusal of any society page will show.

Fat is one of the great American paradoxes: films, television, and magazines all idolise undernourished fashion waifs; the weight-loss industry generates billions of dollars per year, yet back in the heartland Mr. and Mrs. America are doltching extra mayonnaise on their Big Macs and tucking into a large order of fries. Ironically, discrimination against fat people is tolerated in a way that would be unthinkable for any other form of prejudice.

Dying
It’s in extremely bad taste for an American to die, not to mention inconsiderate to loved ones and friends. Americans try to pretend that death doesn’t happen at all, and certainly not to their own personal selves. When someone does die, Americans don’t know what to say and try to put the experience behind them as soon as possible. Mentioning death in polite society is considered morbid unless it’s in the context of a lurid murder or major disaster.

Getting sick is in almost as bad taste as dying (and significantly more expensive). When an American asks “How are you?” he or she knows the answer already: “Fine, thanks. And you?”

Gadgets
Do you need to chop lettuce? Dry your hair? Buff your fingernails? Cook a hot dog? Make popcorn? Scent the air? If so, America has an electrical appliance constructed specifically for that purpose, and it can be acquired either from a drugstore or by calling the telephone number of an advertisement on late-night television.

American inventiveness, not satisfied with giving the world the automobile, the airplane, colour television,
cellular telephone and the Internet, has tackled less obvious needs. Americans own thousands of specialised tools that address nearly every human requirement, however obscure. This is the land of the electric salad dryer, the electric can opener, the electric soap dispenser, the electric air freshener, the electric hair curler, the in-the-shell egg scrambler and the electric tweezers. Heaven forbid one should have to do anything manually.

Right now American brides by the thousands are opening boxes containing electric bread-baking machines and pasta makers. Meanwhile, their parents’ electric carving knives, electric woks and electric casserole warmers gather dust.

Leisure and Pleasure

If there’s one thing at which the United States excels, it is amusing itself and the world. Not that Americans have much time for leisure. As most workers receive only two weeks of paid leave each year, the mini-vacation is very popular. People head out of town for a long weekend of three or four days so as not to burn up all their holiday time at once.

The United States offers vast holiday resources. The average family *modus operandi* for holidays is to pack the children and a huge amount of luggage into a car or RV (recreational vehicle – a motorised small house with all the comforts of home) and drive thousands of miles. Favourite activities include camping, fishing, and visiting America’s national monuments and sights. The fact that all these attractions are separated by hundreds of miles of Interstate only adds to the fun.

When they go on holiday Americans become even more American than usual, if that’s possible, wearing crazy-patterned shorts, white running shoes, and T-shirts with offensive slogans. They carry their wallets in crescent-shaped ‘fanny packs’ that only emphasise their girth, and patronise ice cream and fudge vendors. Americans at home despise holiday-makers who clog the streets and eat too much. Then on their own two weeks off they’ll dress up, get in the Winnebago (a popular RV), and go and do it all themselves.

Sport

A polyglot, varied country like the United States needs a national lingua franca, something that allows the members of any minority subculture to communicate on a friendly basis with people from vastly different backgrounds. Sport is this language. Formerly restricted largely to males, sports talk has become the universal means of communication as the genders approach social equality.

A legal change in 1972 opened the way to women’s participation in college sports. Women now have their own basketball league and the women’s soccer team is a world champion. Ask the average American to name a famous soccer player, the answer might be Mia Hamm or Brandi Chastain, not one of those loser guys.

Major cities have a professional football, baseball, basketball, or hockey team, while smaller towns make do with a high school, college, or minor league team. The sports year may be divided roughly into baseball in summer, football in autumn, basketball in spring, and hockey forever. In practice, the seasons overlap – a hectic scheduling which prevents the television from ever becoming completely idle and gives American males a year-round excuse to escape weekend chores.

Every American football and basketball team, from
high school on up to the professional leagues, has an auxiliary squad of attractive young women who wave pom-poms and lead the fans in various cheers. Just as every American boy yearns to be a football quarterback, so girls yearn to head the cheerleading squad, amidst vicious real-life rivalry.

Seats for professional sporting events are neither cheap nor, in some cases, easy to get. In Washington, D.C., for example, the waiting list for season football tickets is several decades long. The good news for sports fans is on cable television, where various all-sports channels broadcast every conceivable game. New split-screen technology allows addicts to watch several games at once.

The Big Game

There are big games, and then there is The Big Game – the Superbowl. The Superbowl is the most important event in the world, probably in the universe. A lot of sports fans would argue that this annual American football game is the most important event of any kind ever held, certainly more important than the invasion of Normandy or the inauguration of a new president.

This end-of-January extravaganza purports to be the World Championship of a game that is only played professionally in North America. (There is a World League of American Football, but the chances of one of its teams playing in the Superbowl any time soon are thinner than a cheerleader’s panties.)

The game’s promoters select a stadium that’s as large as possible in a city that’s warm enough so that wealthy fans won’t freeze to death, usually somewhere in Florida, California, or Texas. For maximum dollar impact, the game is scheduled to allow easy viewing in all the main American time zones, and advertisers trot out their most innovative commercials for the Superbowl, paying upwards of $2,200,000 a minute for the privilege of showing them. This may well be worth it, since on Superbowl Sunday more than half of all American televisions are tuned to The Game.

On Superbowl Sunday, Americans hold parties to watch television and consume beer, pizza and nachos. In a city that has a team playing in the Superbowl, all public activity stops and traffic disappears. When the game is over, riotous celebrations, or sometimes just riots, break out in the neighbourhood with the most bars.

Born to Shop

The American love affair with shopping is more than the natural by-product of a materialistic society. Shopping isn’t a chore, it’s recreation. It’s a pleasure, an amusement, a way to spend time. Friends will make a date to go shopping together and happily return home empty-handed.

The most popular tourist attraction in the state of Virginia is not Mount Vernon, home of president George Washington, nor Monticello, home of president Thomas Jefferson, nor even Williamsburg, the colonial capital-cum-theme park originally restored by the Rockefellers. It’s Potomac Mills, a shopping centre about 20 miles south of Washington, D.C.

American shopping malls (and supermarkets) are palaces of consumerism, vast labyrinths of shops and restaurants. Surrounded by many acres of car parks, laden with costly merchandise from all over the world, America’s malls beckon with glitter and lights. In suburban communities (now called ‘edge cities’), it’s common for schools to hold dances and parties in shopping malls. They’re clean and safe and patrolled by private security guards who have
far broader latitude than publicly funded police.

The ultimate in shopping convenience, of course, is the Internet, now rapidly replacing mail-order. At one time Sears Roebuck even sold houses by mail-order. Many are sturdy and habitable 90 years on. Today, every home still receives hundreds of coloured catalogues offering every imaginable item (and some unimaginable items) through the mail. But the interactive Internet is faster and more fun to use than old-fashioned, low-tech paper. Armed with a computer and a credit card, an American can, and will, outfit a household without budging an inch.

Even grocery shopping has gone electronic – Americans can click on a picture of frozen peas and have the real thing show up the next day in an insulated wrapper. Some Americans go on line for everything, such as making investments, learning to drive, or finding someone to marry.

The goal of the Founding Fathers was to create a society without hereditary distinctions; George Washington turned down the offer of a kingship and chose the presidency instead. Unfortunately, egalitarianism left a tremendous snobbery gap, since nobody could feel better than anybody else simply by reason of birth. Money is the great de-equalizer.

Americans are quite open about their obsession with money. They cheerfully ask and tell each other what possessions cost and how much they earn (though the latter figure is often inflated for public consumption), and have conversations like, "How much did your lawyer charge you for your divorce? Really? Wow. I guess I got a better deal than I thought."

Class and Social Status

Almost every American, when asked, will describe him or herself as middle class. (For practical purposes, middle class means having a job.) Today's Americans no longer believe that anyone can grow up to be president, and are only too conscious of the vast gaps in welfare between their richest and poorest citizens. But they haven't given up all illusions of equality.

America provides vast social mobility. A plumber could easily have a son who's a college professor, and just as easily, a college professor could have a son who's a plumber, especially when the son discovers the direction of the salary differential between the two professions.

In other countries those with hereditary wealth may lead lives of ostentatious indolence. In the United States even those who don't need to work pretend they do. Anyone without a job is a non-person. An American conversational staple is to ask, "What do you do?" (often followed by "Where are you from?"). The only forbidden
answer is “Nothing. I’m rich.”

When they talk about class, Americans mean a loose consideration of background and attitude that is unrelated to wealth. Donald Trump, for example, while possessed of great wealth, has remarkably little class, while Katherine Hepburn has class down to her toes.

Immigrants

Every new wave of immigrants is met with hostility by the old. The Dutch in Nieuw Amsterdam (now New York) viewed the English arrivistes with suspicion; the English mistrusted the Germans, who refused to hire the Irish, who discriminated against the Russians and Poles, who won’t live next to the Vietnamese, and so on. Nobody already in the United States wants to let anybody new enter.

Like it or not, Mexico sends hundreds of thousands of its citizens north across its (heavily patrolled and fenced) border every year. Through sheer population pressure Mexico is accomplishing what no other foreign government has ever seriously attempted: conquest of the United States. In the American west and southwest, Spanish is the unofficial second language and signs and government documents provide information in Spanish as a matter of course. Office workers who want the rubbish taken out write ‘BASURA’ instead of ‘TRASH’ on the boxes.

An American’s Car is His Castle

The automobile, along with a house and a garden, is an essential element of the American Dream.

The average American household has 1.7 vehicles (210 million vehicles in a country of 275 million people); each vehicle is driven an average of 12,000 miles per year at an average highway speed of 59 miles per hour, though some Interstates are so congested that rush-hour speeds may be less than half that. (An average of 75% of vehicles ignore the posted 65-mile-per-hour legal speed limit: those that don’t have just seen a police car.) Most cars are used for daily commuting; less than 6% of the American workforce uses public transportation to get to work. Some of the country’s wonderful high-speed highways now carry three or more times the intended amount of traffic and twice a day turn into parking lots. Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., win the prize for the two cities with the worst congestion.

Even if suburban residents could walk to anything other than the house next door, they wouldn’t. Walking is un-American. Whenever possible, Americans drive and, if necessary, wait to get a parking place close to their destination. Congestion occurs as drivers circle the shops, looking for a parking space that’s closer to where they want to go.

American cars are all air-conditioned and automatic. A ‘stick shift’ (manual) is harder to drive and therefore considered sportier, more masculine. (Continually pressing on the clutch can get tiresome if one drives 30 miles each way to work in heavy traffic, as many Americans do.) An American man might buy a non-automatic so his wife won’t be able to drive it – and vice versa.

A car is not just an American’s castle, it’s a suit of clothes, a haircut, a display of one’s personality to the world. Car owners not only select vehicles that reflect this, from red Mazda Miatas to long black Mercedes, they also customise them in innumerable ways. They paint the cars with flames, stripes, or woodland scenes; they add mirrors and chrome and special headlights; they put shingles all over old schoolbuses and turn them into holiday motor homes. (Japanese cars are disparagingly
referred to as 'rice rockets' or 'econoboxes'. Small European cars are not permitted on the road at all because they are a hazard on the highways.

More conventional drivers satisfy themselves with bumper stickers that reveal their educational background, political opinions, or marital status, from ‘Yale School of Law’ to ‘If you’re rich, I’m single’.

But the biggest purveyors of automotive messages are state governments, which offer special licence plates for a few extra dollars. These ‘vanity tags’ allow drivers to identify their vehicles with six or seven numbers and letters they choose themselves. This has spawned an elaborate form of coded communication, with car owners outdoing each other to see who is the cleverest. A snappy red convertible might have 6UL DV8. A dentist might have 2TH DR or Molar, while a Tonkinese cat fancier has TONK MOM and a lawyer TORTS. A patriotic Chevy pickup advises H8 4N TRX, while sedate black sedans with Clergy medallions offer INRI or III XVI, an allusion to the verse from the Gospel of St. John. Political opinions abound, e.g. DEM CAR and LEFANT.

Applications are checked for potential obscenity, but with mixed success; most state employees are not multilingual. A citizen requesting GOV SUX was turned down, protested publicly, and got his tag.*

Church versus State

America has no official religion of any sort, other than the near-universal worship of Mammon and widespread devotion to the cult of Disney. The Constitution forbids establishment of religion and effectively separates all political and religious activity. Spoken prayer is forbidden at school graduations, and towns may not use public funds to display nativity scenes at Christmas.

Americans are entitled to attend the church of their choice. Freedom of religion even extends to inventing one’s own. Anyone who wants to can start a religion. Indeed, religion can be a profitable enterprise, since religious institutions do not pay taxes and contributions to them are tax-deductible. Such new churches have names like the Church Universal and Triumphant, the Universal Life Church, and the Bible Rock Church of God. However, the most influential American-born religion is the Church of the Latter-Day Saints in Utah, also known as the Mormons, which has millions of members around the world and continues to grow.

In the area known as the Bible Belt, an ill-defined zone that stretches roughly from the lower East Coast westward towards Missouri and Kansas, small independent churches sprout like cotton plants, usually preaching variations on the popular themes that evolution is a lie, unbelievers are going to hell, and God likes America best.

Americans like to believe that the world cannot possibly function without their presence. Thus, periodically someone will predict the end of the world, usually based on a new mathematical interpretation of the book of Revelations or observation of an astronomical anomaly. Occasionally the hysteria becomes fairly widespread as thousands of people turn into True Believers in order to reserve a good seat for the Ultimate Superbowl. The fact that they are invariably disappointed doesn’t stop them from doing it all again at a later date.

*For the rebus-impaired, the above tags include ‘sexual deviate’, ‘tooth doctor’, ‘hate foreign trucks’, ‘Democrat car’, ‘elephant’, a symbol of the Republican party, and ‘Government sucks’.
Custom and Tradition

Holidays

As a secular country, the United States has trouble with holidays because religious observances and saint’s days are off-limits as far as the public calendar is concerned. Yet the traditional cultural observances are mainly religious in nature. What’s a non-sectarian nation to do?

To solve the problem, the Americans observe their holidays on a two-tier system. In the first tier are the official government holidays, primarily patriotic, which comprise a dozen or so days commemorating notable men and important civil events. Most of these float to the nearest Monday to provide a series of three-day weekends for office drones. Banks and workplaces are closed, there is no mail delivery, and public institutions in general shut down. Shops are open, however. In America, the shops are always open, except on Christmas Day.

Observance of most secular holidays is limited to parades, speeches, and enthusiastically advertised department store sales. But in the American ritual calendar, there are three summer holidays — Memorial Day, the Fourth of July (Independence Day), and Labour Day — which are consecrated to outdoor barbecues. All across the country homeowners dust off their Weber grills, open packs of hot dogs for the children and trays of chicken, steak, or ribs for the adults, douse lumps of charcoal in evil smelling flammable liquids, and proceed to carbonise the meat, pollute the air, and irritate their stomachs. Holding backyard barbecues is popular all summer long, of course, but on those three days it’s mandatory.

The Fourth of July domestic culinary pyromania is followed by community pyrotechnics. Every town puts on the most lavish public fireworks display it can afford, and many families light their own Roman candles and sparklers. Since fireworks laws vary from state to state, a certain amount of smuggling goes on, with interesting fireworks flowing from states with the laxest controls to states that place more emphasis on public safety.

The population at large also observes a dozen or more unofficial holidays, which celebrate various aspects of religion and popular culture, and which are promoted by the retail, greeting card, and floral industries — such as National Secretary’s Day, Grandparents’ Day, and Sweetest Day, which was initiated by the employee of a candy company in Chicago in the 1930s to distribute candy and gifts to city’s orphans, along with the sick and shut-in, and so called because the gestures were the sort that elicited a cry of “That’s so sweet!”

St. Patrick’s Day turns everybody in the United States into honorary Irishmen and women. Everything turns green, even things not normally seen in that colour. Bars serve green beer, bakeries produce green bagels, Chicago goes the extra mile and dyes the river green.

It is traditional on St. Patrick’s day to consume a minimum of one serving of an alcoholic beverage in an Irish bar, and on this day all bars become Irish, as do all musicians. The nation’s real alcoholics refer to St. Patrick’s Day as ‘amateur night’.

Few holidays tap into the American psyche so closely as Halloween*. Some of the nation’s most distinctive character traits — exhibitionism, religious extremism, paranoia, and greed — all come together on Halloween to celebrate, protest, and turn a profit. Adults and children alike wear costumes, often to work (air travellers may find their flight attendants dressed as witches or fairies). Religiously conservative parents make annual attempts to ban Halloween pumpkins and ghost costumes from schools because, they claim, it teaches the children to

* which is now the second most expensive, after Christmas.
worship Satan. Other parents allow their children to go trick-or-treating (code for ‘give me some candy or I’ll drape toilet paper all over your shrubbery’) – but then, fearing sabotage, take the candy to the airport or police station so it can be X-rayed for foreign objects. (The ‘razor blade in the apple’ story is a hardy perennial.)

New Year’s Eve features humiliation of a qualitatively different sort: if one is single, it becomes essential to find a companion for this, the most important date night of the year. Being dateless on New Year’s Eve is proof positive of a person’s social and sexual undesirability.

Celebrations on the East Coast centre around televised events from Times Square, New York, the official arbiter of just when the New Year arrives. But since the United States covers five time zones, the New Year hops across the country in one-hour jumps, and by the time Hawaii blows its noisemakers for the New Year, the rest of the country is fast asleep.

Family Gatherings

Thanksgiving, the third Thursday in November, is time for far-flung families to join around a common table. Grown children brave the busiest travel season of the year to return to their ancestral nest, where they eat too much, drink too much, and pick up year-old arguments as though they had never left home.

The traditional meal centres around a roast turkey stuffed with breadcrumbs and sage, supplemented by a generous assortment of candied yams topped with baby marshmallows, mashed potatoes with gravy, baked potatoes, potatoes au gratin, baked winter squash, mashed winter squash, jellied salad, green salad, stewed tomatoes, canned green beans, creamed onions, brussels sprouts, cornbread, dinner rolls, cranberry relish, celery, olives, pumpkin pie, apple pie, mince pie, Indian pudding, and ice cream. The goal is to eat so much that nobody can move, and then watch football on television. On this day it is traditional to bow one’s head and give thanks for life’s many blessings. However, most celebrants are actually silently giving thanks that they only see their families once a year.

Showers

In America any change of status – birthdays, anniversaries, leaving a job, getting married, having a baby – warrants a celebration of some sort. New brides and the newly pregnant are treated to a ‘shower’, at which guests (traditionally all female) shower the bride or mother-to-be with gifts. Depending on the occasion, offerings range from the utilitarian (towels, an electric frying pan) to the salacious (massage oil and crotchless panties).

Bigger and Better

Americans give the merest mumbling lip service to the metric system, while continuing to quantify almost everything with the tried-and-true units of measurement they have used since before the French Revolution.

Certain measures, however, are more important than others and are based on units that may not be found in any standard conversion table. Some standard United States units of measure include the following:

The toaster oven. In the late 20th century the toaster oven replaced the breadbox both as a domestic appliance and as a standard unit of volume, often for humorous references. (“We were attacked by mosquitoes the size of toaster ovens.”)
The football field. A regulation American football field is 100 yards long and 160 feet wide (91 x 48 metres). Any large flat area, such as the deck of an aircraft carrier, the amount of paper used to print the San Francisco Examiner, or the exterior of the World Trade Center, is described as being “as big as n football fields”.

The New York minute. Everything moves faster in New York City, including time. A New York minute is thus much shorter than sixty seconds, indeed, it’s almost instantaneous: “I’d go out with Sandra Bullock in a New York minute.”

The wind-chill factor. Not satisfied by measuring ambient temperature with an obsolete system, Americans invented the wind-chill factor, which combines degrees Fahrenheit with air velocity to create a number that’s much more impressive. For example, when a temperature of 32°F combines with a 10-mile-an-hour wind, the wind-chill factor drops to 20°F, which sounds a lot colder and makes those who venture out in it feel hardy and adventurous. In summer what is called the ‘comfort index’ takes over, combining temperature with humidity to prove that getting the central air-conditioning replaced last year really was worth the money.

Currency. American coins and bills have been specifically designed to confuse natives of other nations. Coins include the penny, nickel, dime, and quarter, not one of which is labelled with its actual cents’ value in numerals. American folding money is green, of uniform size and design, with a picture of a dead president on it. Thus a $10 bill (or note) looks a lot like a $1 bill or a $100 bill. Since the largest bill in general circulation is $20 (a deliberate move to make large cash transactions obvious and cumbersome and thus discourage crime), the confusion doesn’t affect the average American, who never pays cash anyway and uses a credit card for all purchases costlier than a Coke.

Good Looks and Hygiene

Frenchmen worry about their livers. Germans worry about their excretory abilities. Americans worry about their hair. The hair on their heads, that is. Women remove most of their other hair, including the bits that stick out around what is charmingly euphemised as ‘the bikini line’.

When asked in a survey what they notice first in a potential mate, the answer from both men and women was hair. Having good hair is more important than having a college education or a happy family.

American drug stores burst with hair care products: shampoos, conditioners, cream rinses, spray-on detanglers, permanent colourants, temporary colourants, setting gels, styling mousses, gloss enhancers, curl relaxers, curl activators and holding sprays. This means that the average American’s hair contains more chemicals than Bhopal. Every American woman has at least one hair dryer, and usually a curling iron and electric rollers besides, not to mention styling brushes, smoothing brushes, holding combs, barrettes, clips, bands and other decorations. Men also have hair dryers and, if they suffer from baldness, they use a growth stimulator, buy hairpieces, or have hair transplanted from the hirsute part of the scalp to the bare areas.

Hair makes a political as well as a personal statement. In the 1960s, an Afro hairstyle was a badge of independence among African Americans. Recruits into the U.S. Marines have their heads shaved as part of their introduction to military life and are called ‘jarheads’ as a result, though not to their faces. The ‘big hair’ look is a badge of femininity and often denotes social class as well. The worst personal crisis an American can endure is a ‘bad hair day’.

Hillary Clinton was famous for changing her hairstyle as First Lady; when she became a Senator she changed it
yet again. Clinton himself made headline news when he had his hair cut, allegedly for $400, in his airplane on the runway of Los Angeles airport. The mockery this provoked rings hollow, though. Every American would love to get a $400 haircut.

Body Hair and Odour

Excess body hair is taboo, especially in females. American women shave their legs and armpits and assume that any hairy-legged woman is a lesbian out to destroy the American Way of Life.

The odour of the human body is considered repulsive. Americans like pleasant scents, and douse themselves and their personal products liberally with perfume. They use deodorant in their armpits (which they delicately call ‘underarms’), spray their homes with room freshener, put fuzzy dice with air freshener in their cars and drape their bathrooms with scented toilet tissue.

In the Bathroom Cupboard

Anyone with something to hide wouldn’t keep it in the medicine cabinet. Visitors have a habit of opening the door just to have a peek while washing their hands. One ingenious hostess punishes prying dinner guests by filling her medicine cabinet with marbles, which fall noisily into the washbasin when the door is opened.

What they are likely to find is:

- Deodorant, because Americans not only sweat more than Europeans (it’s hot in America), they worry more about the odour.
- Antacids, because indigestion is part of the American way of life (and diet).
- Allergy, sinus and headache medication, especially during the various pollen seasons.
- Tranquillisers or anti-depressants, to alleviate the stress of being American.

Heartache

The heart is amazing – it beats more than 30 million times a year, pumping life-giving oxygen throughout the body, without getting tired or ever taking a day off. It’s a very American kind of muscle.

Americans don’t take their hearts for granted. Heart disease is a leading killer, and there isn’t a sentient American who doesn’t know this on some level. Americans fear cancer with a deadly terror, but they fear a heart attack even more. Health-minded Americans shun activities linked with heart disease, such as smoking and eating fatty foods, and engage religiously in vigorous exercise, known as ‘working out’. Joggers can be seen on the streets in droves soon after dawn, and health clubs and gyms dot the landscape of major cities. In an exercise in irony, most health club members drive to an exercise studio to go running on a treadmill.

Heart fear is largely, although not exclusively, a masculine phenomenon. “You’ll give me a heart attack!” an American father screams at his teenage daughter as she leaves the house wearing a couple of handkerchiefs and a bit of gold string. The daughter usually reacts by bringing home a series of unsuitable males to see if Daddy will put his money where his mouth is. Some fathers make good on their promise, some don’t.

For some men fear of a heart attack is an incentive to fidelity. Every once in a while a famous public figure suffers a heart attack while alone in the company of a person who is not his wife. The resulting publicity does
wonders for the nation’s marriages.
Not everyone in the country has stopped smoking and drinking and eating steak or started exercising, of course, but they know they should. Evidence that a glass of red wine every day helps prevent heart attacks gives these people much hope.

Health Care and Doctors
One reason Americans are obsessed with staying healthy is that it is much, much cheaper than getting sick. American medical care, like so much else in the United States, is the finest that money can buy, but then one needs money to buy it. The system that provides medical services includes a bewildering array of public and private facilities reimbursed by a patchwork of privately funded and government-mandated insurance schemes that usually cover part, but not all, of the cost of treatment. For non-emergencies, proof of insurance is a prerequisite for receiving care in a private hospital. Even an insured person who becomes ill may be presented with a bill for 20% or more of the (significant) treatment cost. The end result is that for many Americans a bout of illness is also the broad road to bankruptcy.

Part of the ruinous expense comes from the potential for lawsuits. A doctor who delivers a defective baby, for example, may end up personally liable for millions of dollars to pay for that child’s lifelong care. Enter the spectre of malpractice insurance, which can add as much as $500 to the cost of every hospital delivery.

The medical question ‘Who’s your insurance company?’ sets into motion a maelstrom of paperwork and forms, often requiring months and many telephone calls to unravel. A patient who cannot pay is turned over to a collection agency, like any other deadbeat.

Americans treat doctors with a strange mixture of awe, respect, cynicism, and contempt. A number of jokes reflect their unique perspective – e.g. St. Peter was welcoming a new arrival when a red Ferrari driven by a bearded older man in a tweed hat zoomed at full speed through the pearly gates. ‘Who’s that?’ asked the new arrival. ‘Oh,’ said St. Peter, ‘That’s God. He thinks he’s a doctor.’

Culture
Though the fine arts do exist in the United States, often heavily subsidised by government and charitable foundations, the country’s true pulse is popular. Ever the beacon of democracy, America produces culture of the people, by the people, and for the people, all the people, all over the world.

American popular culture is, in fact, the most popular pop culture ever invented. A dubbed version of The X-Files blares from televisions in Brazil and China, Spanish señoritas munch McDonald’s in Madrid, and Thai taxis travel to the rhythms of Madonna.

Like King Canute, foreign governments occasionally try to stop the rising tide of American cultural influence, and like the hapless king they always fail. The tsunami that is American popular culture sweeps aside everything in its path.

Television
Television is the single strongest cultural influence on American life and the widely recognised lowest common denominator. More homes have televisions than indoor plumbing, and the average child spends more time watch-