ing television than he or she does in the classroom.

Television defines a reality of its own; news that isn’t covered on television didn’t happen, and television-only events (such as the wedding or the death of a fictitious character) provoke nationwide reactions.

Daytime shows lean towards endless soap operas with plots that revolve around infidelity and medical crises, and talk shows in which hosts prod their guests to reveal personal details no sane person would want to make public.

The American passion for getting something for nothing reaches a frenzy in evening game shows. Another evening staple is the hard-boiled investigative show, which dwells on lurid topics such as body-snatching, drug dealing, and juvenile male prostitution. The latest development in this genre is the real-life crime show, on which cameramen follow the police around for an evening and film them making arrests.

Every time you think that no depth is unplumbed, sure enough, television finds a format even more degrading. Survivor, for example, pits a dozen castaways against each other in meaningless competitions; the individual who can endure the most humiliation gets a million dollars. In Temptation Island a number of supposedly happy couples are marooned on an island with a variety of sexy singletons who try to break them up.

Television reached its acme, or perhaps more accurately its nadir, with the introduction of cable and satellite TV, which provides hundreds of channels of unwatchable drivel. Specialised programmes include The Weather Channel, 24 hours a day of barometry and precipitation forecasts; Music Television (MTV) and its country music and soul music imitators; C-Span, which shows the U.S. Congress in session and is widely applied as a soporific; and Court TV, which allows viewers to shriek at the television judge the way sports fans might shriek at a

referee.

Few topics are considered cultural minefields. Turn on an American television any afternoon and you can see people discussing, in intimate detail, before millions of viewers, topics that natives of other nations wouldn’t whisper about in the dark. One may hear the testimony of a man who had a sex-change operation so he could live a fulfilled life as a lesbian, or a wife who had a baby by her sister’s husband and wants another so the child will have siblings (her own husband doesn’t know about the situation, but presumably will soon if he’s at home watching television). Talk-show guests include everything from homosexual fathers to bisexual nuns to children who killed their parents, interspersed with advertisements for laxatives.

Faced with such unabashed exhibitionism, one is tempted to scream, “Is nothing sacred?” The answer, of course, is “Well, actually, no. Not on television, anyway.”

Eating and Drinking

You Are What You Eat

Americans approach every meal in terror that the food will leap up off their plate and kill them or, worse, make them fat. Diet contributes to disease, particularly heart disease, and one never knows which mouthful could be fatal. Suspicious dishes include steak (a ‘heart attack on a plate’) and any high-fat, high-cholesterol, high-calorie, low-fibre food, such as sugar, butter, cheese, ice cream, white bread, or fried anything. Hot dogs, an American staple, have been linked with leukemia in children. Even spinach and beets are not exempt, since they are high in
oxalic acid, which is harmful in large quantities. In the endless American battle for eternal youth, glowing good health and an attractive figure, food is on the front lines, and flavour is the first casualty.

The American dietary obsession is fed by a seemingly endless series of scientific studies that demonstrate the wholesomeness or toxicity of various foodstuffs. When one study found that eating massive quantities of oat bran reduced cholesterol and thus might help prevent heart attacks, the price of oats skyrocketed and American supermarkets were instantly flooded with products containing oat bran, including oat bran candy bars and oat bran beer.

Americans will eat any disgusting and tasteless substance, especially if they can be convinced it will keep them healthy or make them thin. Restaurants put special symbols on their menus to indicate dishes that are ‘heart healthy’ (low in cholesterol and saturated fat) or ‘light’ (an indefinite term that implies, but does not necessarily mean, low calorie or low fat). Supermarkets have aisles of items marked ‘low salt’, ‘low calorie’, ‘low fat’, ‘diet’, ‘cholesterol-free’ or ‘imitation’. (The label ‘low flavour’ would be superfluous.) Americans buy uniform strips of ‘bacon’ extruded from soya beans, liquid fake eggs in little plastic cartons, fat-free cheese that resembles recycled running shoes, carbonated sodas flavoured with chemicals they can’t even pronounce, and high-fibre bread bulked out with wood pulp.

The food itself isn’t nearly as repellent as the food bore. A food bore will preach about the benefits of whatever regimen he or she is following, and (especially in California) is only too willing to explain just how a particular diet is beneficial. Any discussion is larded with comments like “Eating more vegetables prevents cancer, you know”, or “It isn’t fat that makes you fat, it’s carbohydrates that make you fat”, or “Do you know how veal is raised?”

Forbidden foods, particularly chocolate, arouse the same illicit thrill in Americans that other cultures reserve for sex. American diners feel a delicious quiver of guilt with every mouthful of chocolate mousse or Boston cream pie. Rich, ‘sinful’ desserts have sinister names like Devil’s Food Cake, Chocolate Madness, or Death By Chocolate. They’re just explaining what every American already knows: eating may be hazardous to your health.

The American Breakfast

Breakfast has an honoured place in the American diet. Restaurants post signs advertising ‘Breakfast served until 11 a.m.’ or, in the case of all-night diners, ‘Breakfast 24 hours a day’.

Breakfast food, which can be highly regional, includes cold cereal with milk, bacon, coffee, oatmeal, sausage, ham, eggs, scrapple (made from the parts of the pig unfit for sausage), coffee, biscuits (like English scones), home-fried potatoes, toast, fried corn meal mush, maple syrup, coffee, waffles, corned beef hash, pancakes, coffee and grits.

Grits are a quintessentially American dish. They are made from maize that has been soaked in water and treated with caustic lye to scientifically remove every vestige of colour and flavour. Grits look like white, lumpy oatmeal and have less taste than wallpaper paste unless and until they are liberally doused with butter, salt and gravy (especially red-eye gravy, which is made with pan drippings and coffee). Southerners adore them. Northerners think they’re the reason the South lost the Civil War. Starting somewhere around Maryland an invisible line crosses the country: below it grits are considered essential for life, while above it they’re banned as being unfit for human consumption.
Restaurants

American restaurants range from informal, where the counter attendant says “Hi, what’ll you have?”, to formal, where the waiter says “Hello, I’m Alan and I’ll be your server for this evening. Shall I tell you about tonight’s specials?” On occasion the waiter or waitress may even sit down and chat for a few moments to discuss the intricacies of the menu. Intrusive service is what Americans prefer. Some restaurants are famous for the surliness of their waiters and waitresses, using bad manners to attract masochistic munchers by the roomful.

The most typical American restaurants offer no service at all. In 1954, Ray Kroc bought the rights to the McDonald brothers’ hamburger stand and began selling franchises. There are now more than 28,000 McDonald’s restaurants worldwide selling 45 million customers every day. The McDonald’s recipe for success involves serving a very limited menu of popular foods, mainly hamburgers, French fries, and milkshakes, minimising labour costs by breaking preparation down into quantified routine tasks, using disposable packages to eliminate the cost of dishwashing, pricing the product affordably, and maintaining strict quality control.

Whatever else one could say about McDonald’s food, it is eminently predictable. A Big Mac bought in Boston is indistinguishable from the same item in Bangkok. It is so standardised that The Economist of London publishes an annual Big Mac Index to demonstrate the relative purchasing power of various currencies.

Some of the best and least expensive restaurants in the country are the small, independent operations run by recent immigrants. Cambodians, Chinese, Japanese, El Salvadorians, and Ethiopians bring their native dishes to add to the United States’ already heady culinary stew. The great melting pot occasionally produces some odd restaurant bedfellows, such as Cuban-Vietnamese, Mexican-Italian, or Hungarian-Puerto Rican.

Tea or Coffee

Americans drink coffee. Tea in most parts of the country means iced tea, specifically sweetened iced tea, and more specifically, sweetened iced tea with lemon. (The amount of sugar added generally increases as one heads south.)

Anyone who wants a cup of hot tea must be prepared to fight to get it. And even when one can be produced, it’s guaranteed to be dreadful. The typical American tea service consists of a mug, paper cup, or little metal pot of hot water with a tea bag beside it. Sometimes a waiter will bring a box filled with different types of teas from which to choose. Ready-made hot tea is never served; Americans believe that when a restaurant pours boiling water directly over the tea in the kitchen it violates the customer’s constitutional right to control the tea’s strength.

Alcohol

On average, Americans consume more than 36 gallons (American gallons, naturally) of alcohol a year per person.

In most of the country (with the exception of Utah, which is full of teetotalling Mormons), it is perfectly legal and acceptable to have a drink. How and where it is served is another matter, because the sale and consumption of alcohol is regulated locally by states, counties, and towns. In some places one can drive up to a window and buy beer, even though drinking it in the car is illegal. In others places heavily guarded State Stores are only open during office hours and offer a minimal selection.

Root beer, in spite of its name, is not alcoholic. It’s the American equivalent of ginger beer, but flavoured with
sassafras and sarsparilla roots. Even Americans acknowledge that this is an acquired taste.

Traditional American beer is unique. It is not particularly good, just different from the beer the rest of the world drinks. One reason is the climate: in the United States most beer is designed to be drunk in huge quantities, while watching sporting events, during weather hotter than 90°F. Hence the need for a high water content, to promote sweat, and a very low serving temperature, to prevent heatstroke. Too bad the cold kills what little taste the beer had in the first place. Dietary and safety concerns have married one another in the form of light beer, which is lower in calories, lower in alcohol, and (a truly awesome achievement) even lower in flavour than the usual beer.

In the past decade, however, a beer revolution has taken place. Most of the new breweries are micro-breweries, local operations that produce relatively small quantities of darker, stronger, richer and more flavourful European-style beers than the mass-produced canned stuff. Loosening of local alcohol laws has allowed some restaurants to brew their own beers on the premises, and nearly every city with any pretensions has at least one 'brewpub'. This trend does lead to occasional lapses such as Christmas Cranberry Lager or Pumpkin Stout – but this is America.

Such laws can vary widely by state, leading, for example, to the flow of couples to the state where it's easiest to get divorced (Nevada).

States are subdivided into counties, which are divided into cities and towns. The bottom line is taxation: some U.S. citizens must pay taxes to their city, county, state, and federal governments, and then try to live on anything left over.

Americans hate the very idea of government. Antigovernment sentiment is what led the Colonies to split off on their own in the first place. "That government governs best that governs least", Americans will nod sagely to each other, or, similarly, "Keep the government's nose out of my business". This is a fine idea, as far as it goes. The only problem is, Americans love what government does.

They fight like bobcats if a Senator proposes a five-cent petrol tax, but they're happy as larks when the government repaves their exit from the freeway. They don't want the government to know about their medical problems or choose their doctor, but they really appreciate it when Uncle Jake, who fought in Korea, goes to the hospital for free because he's a veteran. They resent paying income tax, but Mom's social security check comes on time every month. Americans are irrevocably conflicted about their government. They want it to mind its own business, but they want it to do more for them. A lot of them would also like it to ban things of which they disapprove.

Structurally, the American national government has three branches: Legislative, Executive and Judicial. The bicameral Legislative branch, collectively called 'Congress', consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Representatives are elected for two-year terms and serve a 'district'. (Each state is divided into voting districts according to population; thus Wyoming, a large but lightly populated state, has one district and one representative, whereas New Jersey, a small but populous state,
Representatives are expected to produce a certain amount of ‘pork’ for their district – government-funded highway projects, military installations and the like. Each state also has two senators, regardless of population. Senators also need to bring home the bacon, but they are obligated to the entire state and only have to worry about being re-elected every six years.

Any American will tell you that Congress is a bunch of jackasses. The only exception is that person’s own representative. Other congressmen who steer big government projects to their districts are playing ‘pork barrel politics’. When one’s own congressman does it, he’s serving the constituency.

The president heads the Executive branch; he approves and ostensibly implements the laws passed by the legislature. In practice, the president and Congress spend most of their time blathering about how something might really be accomplished if the other weren’t so obstinate.

The Judicial branch, in the person of the Supreme Court, has the ultimate authority over how and which laws are enforced. Thus, if Congress and the president enact a law that violates the Constitution, the Supreme Court can strike it down.

The genius of the whole system is that it is so cumbersome and complex that it has trouble accomplishing anything irredeemably stupid.

The Electoral College
Most Americans think that when they mark their ballot for a presidential candidate they have voted for that candidate. This is an illusion. They have actually cast a vote for the candidate’s party. To choose the president, each state appoints a panel of electors equal in number to its senators and representatives, all from the winning party. Some six weeks after the popular election, these electors officially vote for president. Electors in most states are not obliged to vote for their state’s winning candidate. It has happened that some electors voted for nobody, or for some other candidate, or even for the opposing candidate. This has never affected the result. Yet.

In an institution so arcane it is not surprising that things can go horribly awry. There have been four elections in which a presidential candidate won the popular vote yet lost the Electoral College vote. This includes the 2000 presidential race. With Al Gore more than 300,000 votes ahead in the popular vote, George W. Bush was awarded Florida by a margin of 537 votes out of 6 million, or .009%. As a result, Bush had a majority in the Electoral College and got the presidency. (In an additional irony, Al Gore in his role as Vice President presided over the Electoral College and thus certified his own defeat.)

In a purported democracy, the Electoral College is about as undemocratic as you can get.

Systems
To apply the word ‘system’ to anything the Americans do is a bit optimistic. For example, the term ‘health care system’ masks the fact that the provision of health care in the United States is anything but systematic. Many people can’t afford to go to the doctor or pay for private insurance. Then again, the ‘criminal justice system’ implies that criminals are treated fairly and justice is served, whereas anyone who has been involved with the courts knows that this is far from the truth.

The Americans’ need to talk to each other means that the telephone system is the best in the world. Conversely,
the American love for the automobile has driven all other forms of transportation into the ground, and the average city's public transport system is slow, inconvenient, and uncomfortable. In places like New York or Washington, however, it's still faster than driving.

One system that really works, or used to, in the United States is the highway system. When General Eisenhower was commanding the U.S. forces in the European theatre, he saw Hitler's autobahns and said to himself, 'What a nifty way to move military equipment around the country. I wish America had such nice big roads.' Once he was president, he made his dream a reality. Thus was born the Interstate Highway System, now the atherosclerotic arteries of American commerce.

In the beginning, families would go for weekend drives and end the day by going to a drive-in restaurant so they could eat while still in their wonderful car. These days, suburban mothers battle through fierce traffic for hours as they shuttle their children from soccer practice to piano lessons, eating sandwiches behind the wheel out of sheer necessity.

A Little Learning is a Good Idea

Americans believe that going to college is a great idea and will qualify you for a better job, as long as you don't actually have to learn anything.

American lower education is divided into kindergarten, for the under-6 set, then grade school until age 12, then Junior High School for two years and then High School until around age 18.

State-run (public) schools vary enormously in quality depending upon the neighbourhood and the school taxes in each state. Fee-for-service (private) schools are patronised by parents who don't think the state-run schools are good enough for their children. The spectrum of private schools runs from elite institutions to splinter schools run by quirky ideologists or conservative religious groups.

To help lower-income parents, some municipalities issue vouchers that provide students with tuition in private schools. The one small problem with this is that courts have begun striking down such programs; vouchers may be used for religious schools, and this violates the Constitutional separation of church and state.

A university education is available to any American who can afford to pay the tuition and board (now totalling more than $26,000 per year at the major universities); who is needy, sporty or brainy enough to get a scholarship; or who is able to borrow the money. Borrowing the money is increasingly popular, and many students emerge from the university clutching their degree in one hand and the equivalent of a home mortgage repayment book in the other.

Nearly one-third of American secondary school students go on to university, but they don't fully trust what they learn there. Indeed, to the American public anyone who knows too much is suspect. Few Americans read, except for the occasional John Grisham or Robert Ludlum novel. Why bother? About the only subject an American office worker really needs to master is the rules of football.

Crime and Punishment

Americans are fiercely attached to the concept of individual rights, which are specifically spelled out in the country's constitution. These include freedoms of the press, of religion, and of public assembly; the right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment; and the right to keep and bear arms.
In the longstanding American tradition of taking a good idea to its most absurd extreme, these rights have been variously interpreted over the years as the right to publish detailed instructions for building an atomic bomb, the right to sacrifice chickens for religious purposes, the right to stage a political demonstration in support of Nazism, the right to watch television while incarcerated, and the right to order a Mannlicher-Carcano carbine through a mail-order catalogue. Trample on any of these rights and an American will raise an impressive stink, usually by filing a lawsuit.

A Nation of Lawyers

Since it's un-American to lose, no unfortunate event is ever the result of incompetence, or even bad luck. Americans shift the blame on to any handy object – their parents, the government, their spouses, the neighbors. Nothing is ever an American's own fault; therefore, any unfortunate event is grounds for a lawsuit. When an American suffers even a trivial embarrassment or misfortune, the first thought is not, "How can I live this down?" but rather, "I'll sue the bastards".

The desire to find someone to blame and then to 'sue the pants off them' has made the United States the most over-lawyered country in the world, with getting on for one million attorneys in a population of 275 million. The nation's capital has one lawyer for every 19 residents. This absurd situation occurs because laws are made, enforced, and reported on by lawyers. Congress includes more than 400 lawyers, and thousands more clutter up government agencies, law enforcement, and the media.

Ridiculous lawsuits abound, including the man who jumped in front of a New York subway train and then sued for injury; the woman who sued the Pennsylvania state lottery because she did not win, and the golfer who sued a golf course when he was hit by his own ricocheting ball. In the United States, anyone can file a lawsuit, and often it seems as though just about everyone has.

Limiting Your Liabilities

In a litigious country like the United States, manufacturers try to limit their liability in every way possible, including warning consumers about possible ill effects from using their products. As a result, almost every product or device comes with a warning label of some sort. Carnival rides alert their riders 'May cause nausea'. Alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and artificial sweeteners inform users about the substance's potential for cancer and birth defects. Laundry detergent advises 'Do not use internally', hair dryers warn 'Do not use in the shower', toasters caution 'Do not use on metal objects'.

The only possible explanation is that, coexisting with normal Americans is a species of humanoid lizards who toss their radios into the bathtub and put coins in their food processors. Unfortunately, even a casual reading of the average daily newspaper confirms this hypothesis.

Trial and Imprisonment

Under the American constitution, in theory criminals are innocent until proven guilty, are entitled to a speedy trial, may refuse to answer self-incriminating questions, and are entitled to representation by a lawyer. In practice, innocent means 'convicted in the newspapers but not in a court of law', speedy means 'before the accused dies of old age, unless he's pretty old already', and lawyer means 'now give that man in the pinstriped suit all your money'.

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Since just about anything other than imprisonment is considered ‘cruel and unusual punishment’, convicted criminals go to jail. The United States has over a million of its citizens under lock and key – a higher incarceration rate than any other country in the world except Russia. At any given moment, 2.7% of the population are either in prison or on probation, a number equivalent to the entire population of Denmark.

It is gradually dawning on the average American that this kind of law enforcement is not only expensive, it doesn’t work very well. But nobody knows what else to do about crime besides build more prisons. New facilities sprout like weeds as the old prisons fill up, and prison management is the new growth industry. In the meantime, crime continues unabated.

When an American police officer makes an arrest, he or she reads the so-called ‘Miranda Warning’, named after *Miranda v. State of Arizona*, the lawsuit that established that police must inform prisoners of their rights. When taking a suspected criminal into custody, the arresting officer must recite a lengthy warning which begins: ‘You have the right to remain silent. If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law...’

This by no means guarantees gentle treatment by the police. The quality of mercy meted out in the United States depends largely on the region of the country, the nature of the offence, and the attitude and identity of the purported perpetrator. When in doubt or in danger of arrest, a foreigner should say ‘Yes, sir, officer’ a lot, and wave a European passport.

**Drug Use**

An awful lot of people use drugs, even, perhaps especially, the rich. More than half of the nation’s young adults admit to having used marijuana and nearly a fifth to having used cocaine. But it is still a tremendous solecism to talk publicly about one’s drug use unless you are a recovering addict who wants to educate impressionable youth about their dangers.

Legal (i.e. prescription) drug use, on the other hand, is widespread and perfectly acceptable. In some circles it’s customary to compare antidepressant dosages before moving on to other topics.

**Bang, Bang**

Approximately 25% of American households have at least one gun tucked away somewhere, and in the country as a whole there are an estimated 192 million guns. Gun ownership in the United States has the same legal backing as the right to vote and the right to a fair trial. Any attempt to regulate ownership of firearms precipitates a judicial crisis and draws shrieks of outrage from gun owners who fear that gun registration programmes and background checks will deprive them of their right to protect themselves. One of the country’s most influential organisations, the 4.1 million-member National Rifle Association, has determinedly fought any and all attempts to restrict the free trade in firearms. Their reasoning is pretty well summed up by slogans like ‘When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns’.

Hunting remains one of the most popular American sports, with 15 million licensed hunters in the country, including the president. It’s the sport of manly men, who wake before dawn to wander through the frosty woods or sit for hours in a bitterly cold duck blind and then go back to a cabin and drink heavily.

Most guns are owned by exactly such law-abiding citizens and are used carefully, but even these legal and
respective guns kill 31,000 Americans a year. In spite of what one might think, Americans are less likely to randomly shoot each other than to kill themselves (56% of all gun deaths are suicides). Children who find these guns tend to play with them, often with fatal results, and it has been proposed that schools have gun education, like sex education.

Some years ago a toy company manufactured a water gun called the Super Soaker which shoots a powerful stream of water for 50 feet. A group of teenagers playing with these got into an argument, and one was injured. The authorities in their town proposed regulating the water guns to prevent any further such incidents. They would not dream of proposing such legislation for guns that fire real bullets.

Business

Henry Ford didn’t invent the automobile. Instead, he did something better, something even more American. He made cars cheap, cheap enough so that every family could afford one. His marketing philosophy was: ‘They can have any colour they want, as long as it’s black.’

These days what Americans want is choice – choice of colour, style, price and accessories. Successful entrepreneurs think in terms of ‘niche marketing’ and ‘lateral extension’ – in other words, providing more choice to increasingly individualised market segments. Car shoppers today can pick metalflake blue, fire-engine red, or any of a dozen other colours, with interiors to match.

The ultimate American concept is, of course, franchising – selling an already successful format to those who want to open a business. The result has been commercial homogenisation as Pizza Hut gobbles up restaurants and shopping precincts are taken over by The Gap and Victoria’s Secret (which sells irresistible frothy underwear). An American’s natural instinct is to take an already successful idea, improve on it, and then compete against the original. This creates an illusion of variety. Malls all have the same shops, department stores carry the same goods, and close examination reveals that products all contain the same ingredients. Thus Americans have vast freedom of choice, but it’s between virtually indistinguishable options.

In the Office

Work, Americans feel, should be rewarding, interesting, and, if at all possible, fun. Play, on the other hand, requires dedication, persistence, skill and effort. No wonder Americans are confused. If the purpose of work is to succeed, and the purpose of play is to win, is there a difference? The bottom line for Americans is that work is defined as anything that earns money and play as anything that doesn’t turn a profit.

This confusion extends to office attire and relationships. Waiters wear black tie, while software billionaires trot around in shorts and T-shirts with slogans on them. American offices grow increasingly relaxed: in a dot-com company where office amenities may include a tanning salon and a sauna, anything more than a swimsuit could be considered excessively formal.

For Americans, the distinction between a friend and a co-worker blurs to near invisibility. Around the office everyone, with the occasional exception of the company president, is called by his or her first name. Workers routinely discuss their personal affairs in the office, keeping each other informed about their home purchases, their children’s illnesses, and the convoluted nature of
American corporations contribute to the confusion by inviting business associates to social functions held outside business hours. The worst offences of this sort take place in Washington, D.C., where the average congressman receives three or four invitations a day to cocktail receptions, lectures, charitable events, benefit dinners, and so forth, and where hostesses are measured not by how well their guests are entertained but by who shows up for the party.

The warm personal relationships Americans feel at work do not translate into strong corporate loyalty. Almost no-one stays with a corporation for his or her entire career. American workers will drop the present job for a better one without a moment's worry about what the change may mean for their employer because they have seen how loyal their employer is to them — to put it bluntly, not very. The profit motive drives all American commerce, and if staff cutbacks are required to maintain the balance sheet, a corporation will rarely show mercy in sending half the sales department out for a long walk.

Americans on the east and west coasts have strikingly different business styles. On the east coast, the goal is to appear to work as much as possible. Thus, in New York and Washington, employees, especially at law and publishing firms, stay on late into the evening and come into the offices on weekends. In Los Angeles the goal is to appear not to work at all, and deals worth hundreds of millions are discussed at the poolside. Neither coast does any more actual work than the other. Los Angeles continues to produce films and television, and New York keeps the stock market and corporate headquarters going, but both have the smug satisfaction of pointing to the other and saying, “See? We don’t work ourselves to death/lie around on the beach wasting time like they do out on the East/West coast.”

Language and Ideas

American speech is remarkably straightforward. They tell it as it is, even when it’s not a particularly good idea to do so. Linguistic subtlety, innuendo, and irony that other nations find delightful puzzle the Americans, who take all statements at face value, weigh them for accuracy, and reject anything they don’t understand. They call spades spades, or possibly ‘earth-reorientation equipment’ if they work for the government, and have trouble with complex metaphors.

The Americans’ love of tinkering, of making things better, of including those who might be left out, and of avoiding negatives means that they view speaking English as just one more assimilation project. Words have been added from immigrants’ languages (such as ‘schmuck’, a stupid or contemptible person), or conflated out of two words (such as ‘brunch’, a combination of br-eakfast and l-unch), or abbreviated and used for something only marginally related (such as ‘nuke’ for ‘heat in a microwave oven’). Americans love new words and adopt them with alacrity. They also use them to death, as anyone who has had to listen to a business meeting about ‘empowerment’ can attest.

Slang

American idioms are colourful, varied and erratic, the sports-based ones particularly so.

Much of American slang derives from sport, such as avoiding the lines of authority by ‘doing an end run’, failing in an attempt by ‘striking out’, or taking on an easy task because it’s a ‘slam dunk’. Carrying on an ordinary sports conversation requires only a minimum of knowledge. A question such as, “Who do you favour for
the big one?” works well, especially in early January, as does the comment, “How about them Dodgers/Steelers/Bullets/Broncos/Yankees/Falcons/Bears/Eagles/Red Sox?” Suitable post-game comments include “If you ask me, there were some pretty funny calls in that game”, or “A good team makes its own breaks”. These work for almost any sport except possibly chess or bridge.

Learning American slang, or indeed any slang, is shooting at a moving target. Teenagers and technology constantly create new words and new uses for old words. For example, ‘burn’ can now mean ‘copy’, as in “burn me a CD of that new game, will ya?” Local slang spreads rapidly through television, movies, and the Internet, so formerly arcane terms like the New York ‘skanky’ (unsavoury, disgusting) become commonplace country-wide. Fortunately slang becomes obsolete rapidly, so there’s very little point in trying to keep up.

Let’s Verb Nouns
In the United States no noun is too proper to use as a verb. “We’re trialing that now”, says a company spokeswoman about a new service. “It’s impacted our options”, says a politician about a setback his campaign has suffered. “We obsolete our products”, says Bill Gates about Microsoft’s manufacturing policy.

Verbs are action words, much nicer than stolid, immovable nouns. Since most Americans can’t name the parts of speech anyway, they use them interchangeably.

Political Correctness
In almost all circumstances discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or sex is not permitted. All-male and all-white clubs have toppled like dominoes under threats of legal action. Besides, minorities and women have money, and every organisation appreciates members who can afford the dues.

Political correctness now debates the worthiness of many words. The worst word of all, one that should never be used under any circumstances, is the racial epithet beginning with ‘n’, unless the speaker actually is one. Words referring to body functions are polite by comparison.

Hundreds of euphemisms have sprung up to cope with politically incorrect vocabulary. The handicapped are now ‘mobility-challenged’, the blind ‘perceptually impaired’ and the not so bright ‘knowledge-base nonpossessors’. People don’t have pets, they have ‘companion animals’. Nor are they short or fat, but ‘vertically challenged’ or ‘persons of size’. No-one has a failure, he or she has a ‘deficiency rating’.

The American language embraces the bias towards good feelings. Someone doesn’t have a near brush with death; he or she has a ‘life-affirming experience’. Stocks that plummet to half their value are not losers, they are ‘non-performers’. Applicants who do not receive a job offer are ‘selected out’. An upbeat business vernacular calls every problem a ‘challenge’ and every massive lay-off ‘rightsizing’. Mindless cheerfulness particularly pervades the real estate profession, in which ‘cosy’ is code for ‘smaller than a refrigerator carton’ and ‘country charm’ means ‘no retail establishments within walking distance’. Disney theme parks are special hotbeds of such optimism, with perky, well-groomed employees who do nothing but smile, smile, smile.

All this boundless good nature can grate on visitors from more reserved nations. It’s enough to give a European a de-enhanced attitude.
The Author

Stephanie Faul lives in Washington, D.C., where she works in public relations as a ‘talking head’. Growing up in the nation’s capital has given her a unique perspective on the foibles and quirks of her compatriots and has confirmed her belief in Bismarck’s remark that laws are like sausages: it’s better not to see them being made.

Ms. Faul is a typical product of American hybrid vigour: she is half Czech immigrant, half Connecticut Yankee, with a German-speaking grandmother and cousins in Canada, England and Switzerland. Her xenophobic perceptions were honed in a French primary school, a Swiss boarding school, college summers spent drinking Newcastle Brown Ale in British pubs, and occasional trips to Asia and Florida. At home she enjoys African music, Vietnamese food, Italian footwear, Siamese cats, and English novels.

In many ways she feels typically American – curious, inventive, outspoken and practical – but atypical attributes include a distaste for shopping and television and a marked preference for walking instead of driving, which in her neighbourhood is usually faster anyway. Her current ambition is to visit all 50 U.S. states. She has only a dozen left to go, but at a walking pace this could take some time.

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