America's population reflects remarkable ethnic diversity. More than 20 percent of the population of two major cities, Los Angeles and New York, were born in another country. In some other major cities (including San Francisco and Chicago) more than one of every ten residents is foreign born. Non-white people outnumber whites in several large cities. Newspapers commonly use such terms as “Asian American,” “Italian American,” and “Arab American” to reflect the persistence of various ethnic heritages within the United States.

America's population includes Catholics, Protestants of many denominations, and Jews of several persuasions, Moslems, Buddhists, animists, and people who believe in no supreme being or higher power. There are people who have many years of formal education and people who have nearly none. There are the very rich as well as the very poor. There are Republicans, Democrats, independents, Socialists, Communists, Libertarians, and adherents of other political views as well. There are lawyers, farmers, plumbers, teachers, social workers, immigration officers, and people in thousands of other occupations. Some live in urban areas and some in rural ones.

Given all this diversity, can one usefully talk about "Americans"? Probably so, if one is careful.

How Americans See Themselves

Americans do not usually see themselves, when they are in the United States, as representatives of their country. They see themselves as individuals who are different from all other individuals, whether those others are Americans or foreigners. Americans may say they have no culture, since they often conceive of culture as an overlay of arbitrary customs to be found only in other countries. Individual Americans may think they chose their own values, rather than having had their values and the assumptions on which they are based imposed on them by the society in which they were born. If you ask them to tell you something about "American culture," they may be unable to answer and they may even deny that there is an "American culture."

At the same time, Americans will readily generalize about various subgroups within their own country. Northerners have stereotypes (that are, generalized, simplified notions) about Southerners, and vice versa. There are stereotypes of people from the country and people from the city; people from the coasts and people from inland; people from the Midwest; minority ethnic groups; minority religious groups; Texans; New Yorkers; Californians; and so on.

Individualism and Privacy

The most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to individualism. They have been trained since very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life.
and their own destinies. They have not been trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, tightly interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or other collectivity.

It is this concept of themselves as individual decision-makers that blinds at least some Americans to the fact that they share a culture with each other. They have the idea, as mentioned above, that they have independently made up their own minds about the values and assumptions they hold. The notion that social factors outside themselves have made them “just like everyone else” in important ways offends their sense of dignity.

Foreigners who understand the degree to which Americans are imbued with the notion that the free, self-reliant individual is the ideal kind of human being will be able to understand many aspects of American behavior and thinking that otherwise might not make sense.

Many Americans do not display the degree of respect for their parents that people in more traditional or family-oriented societies commonly display. They have the conception that it was a sort of historical or biological accident that put them in the hands of particular parents, that the parents fulfilled their responsibilities to the children while the children were young, and now that the children have reached “the age of independence” the close child-parent tie is loosened, if not broken.

Closely associated with the value they place on individualism is the importance Americans assign to privacy. Americans assume that people “need some time to themselves” or “some time alone” to think about things or recover their spent psychological energy. Americans have great difficulty understanding foreigners who always want to be with another person, who dislike being alone.

**Equality**

Americans are also distinctive in the degree to which they believe in the ideal, as stated in their Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal.” Although they sometimes violate the ideal in their daily lives, particularly in matters of interracial relationships, Americans have a deep faith that in some fundamental way all people (at least all American people) are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else. “One man, one vote,” they say, conveying the idea that any person’s opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as any other person’s opinion.

This is not to say that Americans make no distinctions among themselves as a result of such factors as sex, age, wealth, or social position. They do. But the distinctions are acknowledged in subtle ways. Tone of voice, order of speaking, choice of words, seating arrangements—such are the means by which Americans acknowledge status differences among themselves.
Informality

Their notions of equality lead Americans to be quite informal in their general behavior and in their relationships with other people.

People from societies where general behavior is more formal than it is in America are struck by the informality of American speech, dress, and posture. Idiomatic speech (commonly called "slang") is heavily used on most occasions, with formal speech reserved for public events and fairly formal situations. People of almost any station in life can be seen in public wearing jeans, sandals, or other informal attire. People slouch down in chairs or lean on walls or furniture when they talk, rather than maintaining an erect bearing.

The Future, Change, and Progress

Americans are generally less concerned about history and traditions than are people from older societies. "History doesn't matter," many of them will say. "It's the future that counts." They look ahead.

This fundamental American belief in progress and a better future contrasts sharply with the fatalistic (Americans are likely to use that term with a negative or critical connotation) attitude that characterizes people from many other cultures, notably Latin, Asian, and Arab, where there is a pronounced reverence for the past. In those cultures the future is considered to be in the hands of "fate," "God," or at least the few powerful people or families that dominate the society.

Goodness of Humanity

The future cannot be better if people are not fundamentally good and improvable. Americans assume that human nature is basically good, not basically evil. Foreign visitors will see them doing many things that are based on the assumption that people are good and can make themselves better.

"Where there's a will there's a way," the Americans say. People who want to make things better can do so if only they have a strong enough motivation.

Time

For Americans, time is a "resource" that, like water or coal, can be used well or poorly. "Time is money," they say. "You only get so much time in this life; you'd best use it wisely." The future will not be better than the past or the present, as Americans are trained to see things, unless people use their time for constructive, future-oriented activities. Thus, Americans admire a "Well-organized" person, one who has a written list of things to do
and a schedule for doing them. The ideal person is punctual (that is, arrives at the scheduled time for a meeting or event) and is considerate of other people's time (that is, does not "waste people's time" with conversation or other activity that has no visible, beneficial outcome).

The American attitude toward time is not necessarily shared by others, especially non-Europeans. They are more likely to conceive of time as something that is simply there around them, not something they can "use." One of the more difficult things to which many foreign businessmen and students must adjust in the States is the notion that time must be saved whenever possible and used wisely every day.

**Achievement, Action, Work, and Materialism**

"He's a hard worker," one American might say in praise of another. Or, "She gets the job done." These expressions convey the typical American's admiration for a person who approaches a task conscientiously and persistently, seeing it through to a successful conclusion. More than that, these expressions convey an admiration for achievers, people whose lives are centered around efforts to accomplish some physical, measurable thing.

Foreign visitors commonly remark that "Americans work harder than I expected them to." (Perhaps these visitors have been excessively influenced by American movies and television programs, which are less likely to show people working than to show them driving around in fast cars or pursuing members of the opposite sex.) While the so-called Protestant work ethic may have lost some of its hold on Americans, there is still a strong belief that the ideal person is a "hard worker." A hard worker is one who "gets right to work" on a task without delay, works efficiently, and completes the task in a way that meets reasonably high standards of quality.

More generally, Americans like action. They do indeed believe it is important to devote significant energy to their jobs or to other daily responsibilities. Beyond that, they tend to believe they should be doing something most of the time. They are usually not content, as people from many other countries are, to sit for hours and talk with other people. They get restless and impatient. They believe they should be doing something, or at least making plans and arrangements for doing something later.

**Directness and Assertiveness**

Americans, as has been said before, generally consider themselves to be frank, open, and direct in their dealings with other people.

Americans will often speak openly and directly to others about things they dislike. They will try to do so in a manner they call "constructive," that is, a manner which the other
person will not find offensive or unacceptable. If they do not speak openly about what is on their minds, they will often convey their reactions in nonverbal way (without words, but through facial expressions, body positions, and gestures). Americans are not taught, as people in many Asian countries are, that they should mask their emotional responses. Their words, the tone of their voices or their facial expressions will usually reveal when they are feeling angry, unhappy, confused, or happy and content. They do not think it improper to display these feelings, at least within limits. Many Asians feel embarrassed around Americans who are exhibiting a strong emotional response to something. (On the other hand, Latinos and Arabs are generally inclined to display their emotions more openly than Americans do and to view Americans as unemotional and "cold.")

But Americans are often less direct and open than they realize. There are in fact many restrictions on their willingness to discuss things openly.

Despite these limitations, Americans are generally more direct and open than most people from many other countries. They will not try to mask their emotions, as Scandinavians tend to do. They are much less concerned with "face" (that is, avoiding embarrassment to themselves or others) than most Asians are. To them, being "honest" is usually more important than preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships.

Americans use the words "pushy" or "aggressive" to describe a person who is excessively assertive in expressing opinions or making requests. The line between acceptable assertiveness and unacceptable aggressiveness is difficult to draw.