

# Why Do Americans Act Like That?

So you're going to visit the United States? Great! But be prepared: the values Americans live by may seem strange to you. As a result, you might find their actions confusing, even unbelievable.

This is the kind of advice Dr. L. Robert Kohls gives first-time visitors to the United States. Kohls, Director of International Programs at San Francisco State University, has developed a list of 13 commonly held values which help explain why Americans act as they do. He is careful and cautions visitors also, to avoid labeling these values positive or negative. His aim: "I simply want to help you understand the Americans with whom you will be relating - from their own value system rather than from yours."

Whether one agrees with Kohls or not - or is willing to accept as valid any generalizations about Americans - his observations are thought-provoking.

## 1. PERSONAL CONTROL OVER THE ENVIRONMENT / RESPONSIBILITY

Americans do not believe in the power of fate, and they look at people who do as being backward, primitive, or naïve. In the American context, to be "fatalistic" is to be superstitious, lazy, or unwilling to take initiative. Everyone should have control over whatever in the environment might potentially affect him or her. The problems of one's life are not seen as having resulted from bad luck as much as having come from one's laziness and unwillingness to take responsibility in pursuing a better life.

## 2. CHANGE SEEN AS NATURAL AND POSITIVE

In the American mind, change is seen as indisputably good, leading to development, improvement, progress. Many older, more traditional cultures consider change disruptive and destructive; they value stability, continuity, tradition, and a rich and ancient heritage - none of which are considered very important in the United States.

## 3. TIME AND ITS CONTROL

Time is of utmost importance to most Americans. It is something to be on, *kept, filled, saved, used, spent, wasted, lost, gained, planned, given, even killed.*

Americans are more concerned with getting things accomplished on time than they are with developing interpersonal relations. Their lives seem controlled by the little machines they wear on their wrists, cutting their discussions off abruptly to make their next appointment on time. This philosophy has enabled Americans to be extremely productive, and productivity is highly valued in their country.

#### 4. EQUALITY / FAIRNESS

Equality is so cherished in the U.S. that it is seen as having a religious basis. Americans believe that all people are "created equal" and that all should have an equal opportunity to succeed.

This concept of equality is strange to seven-eighths of the world which views status and authority as desirable, even if they happen to be near the bottom of the social order. Since Americans like to treat foreigners "just like anybody else," newcomers to the U.S. should realize that no insult or personal indignity is intended if they are treated in a less-than-deferential manner by waiters in restaurants, clerks in stores and hotels, taxi drivers, and other service personnel.

#### 5. INDIVIDUALISM / INDEPENDENCE

Americans view themselves as highly individualistic in their thoughts and actions. They resist being thought of as representatives of any homogeneous group. When they do join groups, they believe they are special, just a little different from other members of the same group.

In the U.S., you will find people freely expressing a variety of opinions anywhere and anytime. Yet, in spite of this "independence," almost all Americans end up voting for one of their two major political parties.

Individualism leads to privacy, which Americans see as desirable. The word "privacy" does not exist in many non-Western languages. If it does, it is likely to have a negative connotation, suggesting loneliness or forced isolation. It is not uncommon for Americans to say, and almost to believe: "If I don't have half an hour a day to myself, I go stark-raving mad!"

#### 6. SELF-HELP / INITIATIVE

Americans take credit only for what they accomplish as individuals. They get no credit for having been born into a rich family but pride themselves in having climbed the ladder of success, to whatever level, all by themselves.

In an English-language dictionary, there are more than 100 composite words that have the word "self" as a prefix - self-aware, self-confident, self-conscious, self-contented, self-control, self-criticism, self-deception, self-defeating, self-denial. The equivalent of these words cannot be found in most other languages. It's an indicator of how highly Americans regard the "self-made" man or woman.

#### 7. COMPETITION

Americans believe that competition brings out the best in any individual and in any system. This value is reflected in the American economic system of "free enterprise," and it is applied in the U.S. in all areas - medicine, the arts, education, sports.

## 8. FUTURE ORIENTATION

Americans value the future and the improvements the future will surely bring. They devalue the past and are, to a large extent, unconscious of the present. Even a happy present goes largely unnoticed because Americans are hopeful that the future will bring even greater happiness.

Since Americans believe that humans, not fate, can and should control the environment, they are good at planning short term projects. This ability has caused Americans to be invited to all corners of the Earth to plan, and often achieve, the miracles which their goal-setting methods can produce.

## 9. ACTION / WORK ORIENTATION

"Don't just stand there," says a typical bit of American advice, "do something!" This expression, though normally used in a crisis situation, in a sense describes most Americans' waking life, where action - any action - is seen as superior to inaction.

Americans routinely schedule an extremely active day. Any relaxation must be limited in time and aimed at "recreating" so that they can work harder once their "recreation" is over. Such a "no-nonsense" attitude toward life has created a class of people known as "workaholics" - people addicted to, and often wholly identified with, their job or profession. The first question people often ask when they meet each other in the U.S. is related to work: "What do you do?" "Where do you work?" or "Who (what company) are you with?" The United States may be one of the few countries in the world where people speak about the "dignity of human labor" - meaning hard physical labor. Even corporation presidents will engage in physical labor from time to time and, in doing so, gain rather than lose respect from others.

## 10. INFORMALITY

Americans are even more informal and casual than their close relatives - the Western Europeans. For example, American bosses often urge their employees to call them by their first names and feel uncomfortable with the title "Mr." Or "Ms."

Dress is another area where American informality is most noticeable, perhaps even shocking. For example, one can go to a symphony performance in any large American city and find people dressed in blue jeans.

Informality is also apparent in Americans' greetings. The more formal "How are you?" has largely been replaced with an informal "Hi." This is as likely to be used with one's superior as with one's best friend.

## 11. DIRECTNESS / OPENNESS / HONESTY

Many other countries have developed subtle, sometimes highly ritualistic, ways of informing others of unpleasant information. Americans prefer the direct approach. They are likely to be completely honest in delivering their negative evaluations, and to consider anything other than the most direct and open approach to be "dishonest" and "insincere." Anyone in the U.S. who uses an intermediary to deliver the message will also be considered "manipulative" and "untrustworthy."

If you come from a country where saving face is important, be assured that Americans are not trying to make you lose face with their directness.

## 12. PRACTICALITY / EFFICIENCY

Americans have a reputation for being realistic, practical, and efficient. The practical consideration is likely to be given highest priority in making any important decision. Americans pride themselves in not being very philosophically or theoretically oriented. If Americans would even admit to having a philosophy, it would probably be that of pragmatism. Will it make money? What is the "bottom line"? What can I gain from this activity? These are the kinds of questions Americans are likely to ask, rather than: Is it aesthetically pleasing? Will it be enjoyable? Will it advance the cause of knowledge?

This pragmatic orientation has caused Americans to contribute more inventions to the world than any other country in human history. The love of "practicality" has also caused Americans to view some professions more favorably than others. Management and economics are much more popular in the United States than philosophy or anthropology, and law and medicine more valued than the arts.

Americans belittle "emotional" and "subjective" evaluations in favor of "rational" and "objective" assessments. Americans try to avoid being "too sentimental" in making their decisions. They judge every situation "on its own merits."

## 13. MATERIALISM / ACQUISITIVENESS

Foreigners generally consider Americans much more materialistic than Americans are likely to consider themselves. Americans would like to think that their material objects are just the "natural benefits" that result from hard work and serious intent - a reward, they think, which all people could enjoy were they as industrious and hard-working as Americans. But by any standard, Americans are materialistic. They give a higher priority to obtaining, maintaining, and protecting material objects than they do in developing and enjoying relationships with people.

Since Americans value newness and innovation, they sell or throw away their possessions frequently and replace them with newer ones. A car may be kept for only two or three years, a house for five or six before buying a new one.