

FOURTH EDITION

The

U.S.A.

Customs

and

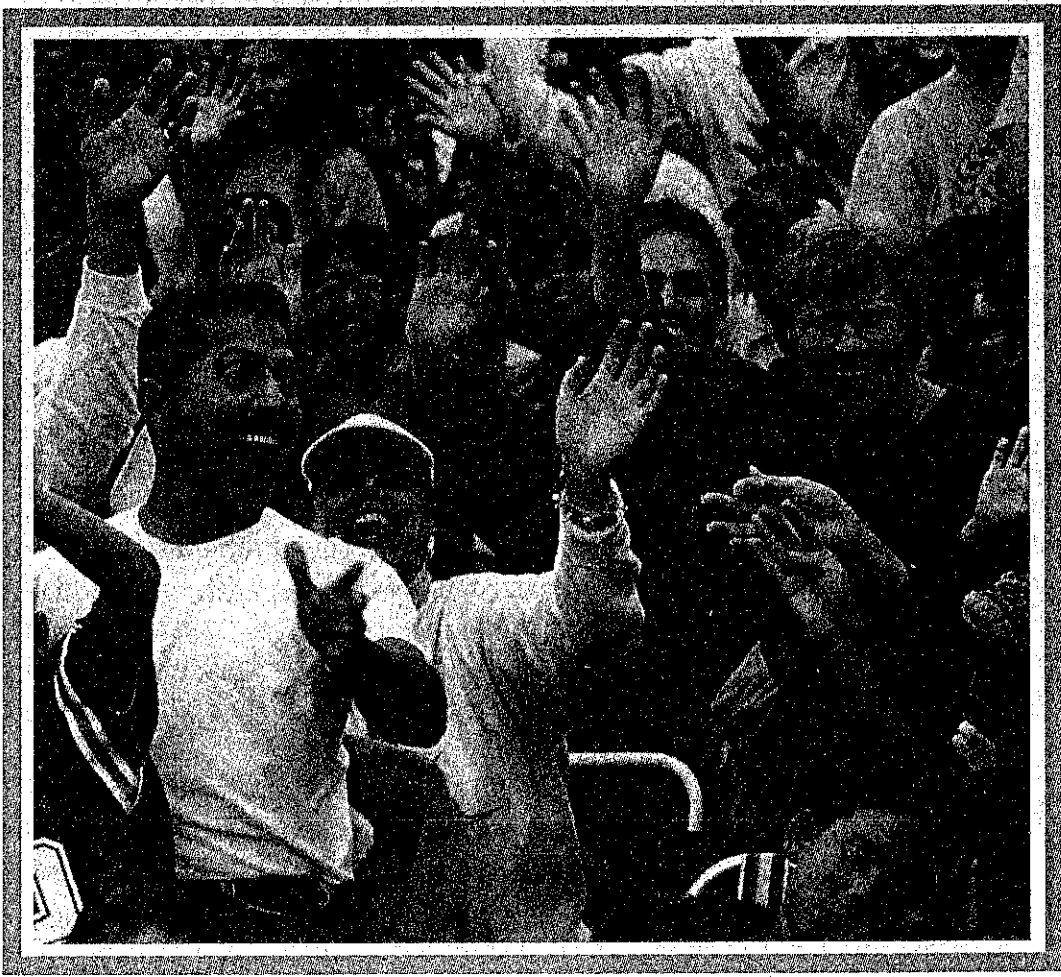
Institutions

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The American Character



Faces of the U.S.A.: diversity as a way of life

BEFORE YOU READ

Discuss

1. Compare Americans to people in other countries. What differences have you noticed in behavior, attitudes, and values?
2. Look at the headings and subheadings in this chapter. Can you predict what each section might have to say about the U.S. and its residents?
3. Take a survey of the languages spoken by students in your class. Where in the world are these languages spoken?

Guess

Try to answer the questions. Then look for the answers in the reading.

1. What is the approximate population of the U.S.? Check (✓) one:
____ 125 million ____ 275 million ____ 425 million
2. Which is the largest ethnic minority in the U.S.? Check (✓) one:
____ Hispanics ____ Asians ____ African-Americans

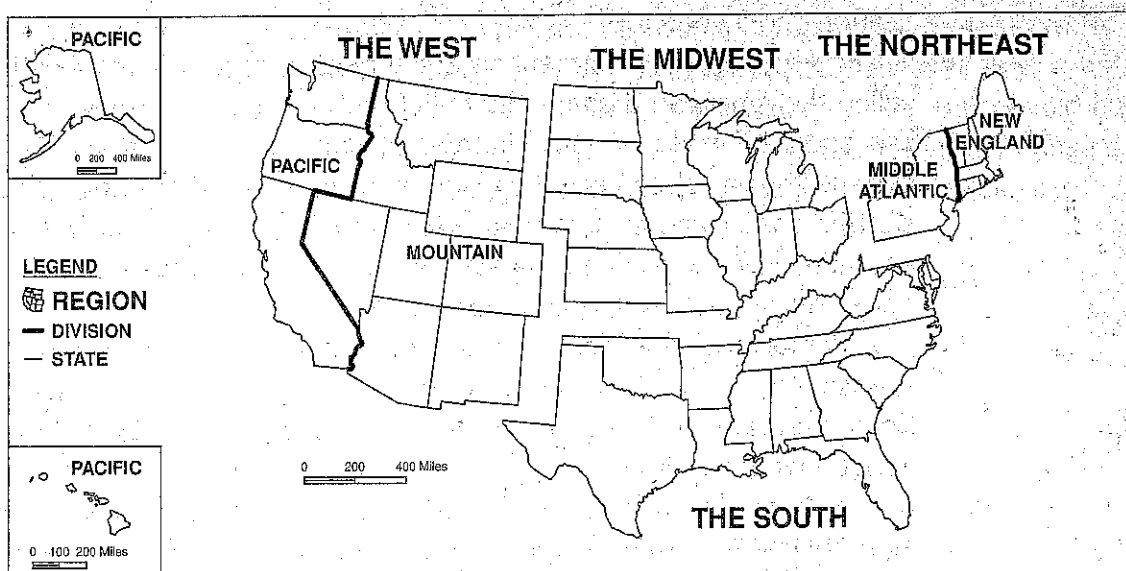
The American Character

A Land of Diversity

- 1 What are Americans like? What do Americans like? These are very different questions. In answering them, this chapter will provide a sketch of the American character. "But wait," some readers say. "In this huge nation of people from everywhere, is there really a national **character**?" Let's tackle this third question first.
- 2 There is great **diversity** in the **ethnic** makeup of America. Nevertheless, many writers have **generalized** about typical American values, attitudes, and beliefs. For example, Mortimer B. Zuckerman, editor-in-chief of *U.S. News & World Report*, sees his country as "a unique culture of self-reliance, independence, resourcefulness, pragmatism, and novelty." He goes on to describe his fellow Americans in greater detail: "We are comfortable with change and with people who make things happen. In America, the new is better than the old; taking charge is valued over playing it safe; making money is superior to inheriting it; education and merit are favored over family ties."
- 3 The most important characteristic of the U.S.A. can be stated in one word: diversity. Most Americans take pride in the great **variety** found in the country's geography and population. Covering 3,700,000 square miles (9,590,000 square kilometers), the U.S. is the fourth-largest nation in the world (after Russia, China, and Canada). Within this vast nation are tall mountains and flat cornfields, deserts and tropical regions, prairies and forests, rugged coastlines and gentle, rolling hills. The climate, too, covers all extremes. In southern Florida, visitors come to swim and sunbathe in December. In northern Alaska, winter temperatures may drop to -75° Fahrenheit (-54° Celsius).
- 4 With roughly 275 million people, the U.S. is the third-largest nation in population after China and India. About 90% of the people now living in the U.S. were born there. Still, the U.S. has one of the world's most varied populations in terms of national ancestry. This diversity is often highlighted and celebrated at school and community festivals. Racially, the U.S. is about 82% white, 13% black, 4% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American (including Eskimo and Aleut). Hispanics are roughly 12% of the entire American population, making Spanish-speaking people the nation's second largest ethnic **minority**. Some newcomers to the U.S. may be surprised by the varieties of skin color they see, but Americans take it for granted. Racism and prejudice are still serious

problems in the U.S.; however, most Americans believe in the ideals of equality and mutual respect.

- 5 Three significant population trends may change the American character to some extent. First, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that, by the year 2050, the country's population will be 394 million. Will more crowded conditions lead to closer friendships or more disputes between neighbors? Second, in recent years, the average age of Americans has been increasing (from 28 in 1970 to about 35 today). This trend, often referred to as the "graying" of America, is expected to continue. By 2023, **demographers** say, about 18% of Americans will be 65 or older. By 2038, that figure will reach 34%. "America is a country of young men," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in the nineteenth century. Americans have often been accused of worshiping youth and undervaluing their elders. Now, the typical American is approaching middle age. Some 72,000 Americans are at least 100 years old! By 2050, there may be 800,000 centenarians. What will happen to the youth culture then? Third, the nation's ethnic and racial minority groups are growing much faster than the general population. Demographers predict that by 2050, this country's minority groups combined will make up the **majority** of the population. No doubt, this change will affect attitudes, values, and customs.
- 6 Regional variations also add diversity to the American character. Travel around the country and you'll notice differences in language, diet, recreation, and even regional character. Some Americans can tell what part of the country other Americans come from just by listening to their accents. Cooking styles also vary from place to place, influenced by the different immigrant groups that have settled in that area and by the edible plants, fish, seafood, and wildlife native to each region. Recreation also varies from place to place, influenced by climate, geography, and ethnic traditions. In addition, attitudes and behavior may differ somewhat from one region of the country to another. For example, New Englanders are commonly described as serious and self-reliant, Southerners as gracious and leisurely, and Westerners as casual and friendly. Californians are said to be eager to try new fads. Midwesterners are considered more **conservative** than Californians and less sophisticated than New Yorkers. Of course, many residents of a particular region do not fit these generalizations.



Regions of the United States

- 7 However, modern communication and mass production tend to decrease regional and ethnic differences. From the East Coast to the West Coast, travelers find similar shopping centers, supermarkets, department and discount stores, restaurants, hotels, motels, and apartment buildings. National advertising creates national tastes in clothing styles and other consumer goods. National news media influence Americans' reactions to world events. Television, movies, and schools help to create a body of American values and traditions. Despite the nation's great diversity, some generalizations can be made about what the typical American believes in, admires, values, and wants.



*Why is the U.S. called "a land of diversity"?
What three population trends are predicted?*

Democracy in Action

- 8 American **democracy** is based on the principle of majority rule. In a democratic legislative body, decisions are made by voting. In the U.S., voting is not just a tool for selecting political leaders and passing laws. It is also a way of making decisions in the business world, in social groups, in schools, and even within the family. Americans believe that people should take part in making the rules they must live by. American children are introduced to the ideas of majority rule and representative government at a very early age. Many families hold weekly meetings to determine household rules and activities. Most schools have student councils with elected representatives so that students can voice their opinions about school regulations and activities. In the adult world, all kinds of organizations (unions, religious groups, etc.) elect officers and make decisions by voting. In publicly owned companies, stockholders elect the directors.
- 9 "All men are created equal," says the Declaration of Independence. This statement does not mean that all human beings are equal in ability or ambition. It means that all people should be treated equally before the law and given equal privileges and opportunities. Equal opportunity means (among other things) an equal chance for a good education and a good job.
- 10 The American commitment to equality of opportunity inspires what is commonly called the American dream—the belief that anyone can achieve success through honesty and hard work. For many immigrant Americans, this dream became reality. Financial success has often been the result of taking a risk, of quitting a salaried position and starting one's own new business. Social mobility—movement from one social class to another—has always been characteristic of the U.S. It is usually achieved by improving one's educational level, occupation, and/or income.
- 11 A democratic, representative government gives citizens an opportunity (and a responsibility) to encourage positive social change. Ordinary citizens can improve conditions, especially if they unite in a common cause. "Grassroots" movements can bring about changes in laws and policies. In the past half-century, many such groups have forced change in local, state, and federal laws. Some groups have even influenced foreign policy—for example, those that opposed American participation in the Vietnam War of the 1960s. Other groups have persuaded lawmakers to pass stricter laws to pro-

tect Americans from drunk drivers, pollution, and the illegal use of handguns. Still other groups fight for the rights of minorities—African-Americans, Hispanics, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, senior citizens, and so on. Americans know that, in the battle for human rights, there is strength in numbers.



*What American attitudes are related to democratic ideals?
What does majority rule mean?*

"Try It—You'll Like It"

- 12 The great American novelist and humorist Mark Twain described the typical Englishman or -woman as a "person who does things because they have been done before" and the typical American as "a person who does things because they haven't been done before." Americans love to try something new out of curiosity and a belief that newer may be better.
- 13 As a nation of immigrants, the U.S. has had a continual influx of people with a pioneering spirit, with the courage to make major changes in their lives. In the mid-nineteenth century, this spirit led American settlers to make the long, difficult, and dangerous journey westward in search of gold or free land. The desire to make a fresh start in a new place is still noticeable throughout the nation. About 42 million Americans change residences every year. Some moves are due to changing jobs or going off to college. Other people move from big cities to suburbs (or vice versa). Some move to find adventure or a more pleasant climate. The pioneering spirit of Americans is evident in the working world, too. Employees change jobs and even careers as opportunities change.
- 14 Americans love science and technology because these fields involve new discoveries. The U.S. has embraced the age of communication with great enthusiasm. From preschoolers to senior citizens, Americans are learning to use computers—at school, at work, and at home. Robots, lasers, and other inventions of modern technology fascinate them. Americans subsidize all kinds of space exploration, from outside the Earth to inside the atom, in order to uncover the secrets of the universe.
- 15 Love of change is closely tied to faith in improvement. Americans have always been optimistic, believing in the perfectibility of people, the basic goodness of their country, and the ability of American ingenuity to improve the quality of life. But people have come to realize that, if life can become better, it can also become worse. The dangers of air and water pollution, nuclear power, and overpopulation have become clear.



What are some examples of the American pioneering spirit?

Typical American Behavior and Values

- 16 Watching Americans in action, foreigners sometimes see behavior that seems rude, misguided, or just plain silly. The following traits are characteristically, but certainly not exclusively, American.

- 17 *Hurry, Hurry, Hurry.* Almost every American wears a watch, and, in nearly every room in an American home, there's a clock. "Be on time." "Don't waste time." "Time is money." "Time waits for no one." All these familiar sayings reflect the American obsession with promptness and efficiency. Students displease their teachers and employees displease their bosses when they arrive late. This desire to get the most out of every minute often makes Americans impatient when they have to wait. The pressure to make every moment count sometimes makes it difficult for Americans to relax.
- 18 The desire to save time and do work more quickly and easily leads Americans to buy many kinds of machines. These range from office equipment such as calculators, photocopy machines, and computers to dozens of home and personal appliances, such as microwave ovens.
- 19 *The Importance of Money.* After visiting the U.S. in the 1830s, the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "I know of no country . . . where the love of money has taken stronger hold . . ." Americans are often accused of being **materialistic**, of valuing wealth and **possessions** above all else. Money is valued both as a symbol of success and also for a more obvious reason—its purchasing power. Many items that didn't even exist 50 years ago are now considered necessities in the American home. In addition, purchases are made in order to "keep up with the Joneses," to show friends that one can afford a bigger house or a fancier car. Also, advertising encourages people to keep buying things far beyond what they need. In the mid-nineteenth century, the American author Henry David Thoreau advised his countrymen, "Simplify your needs!" However, Americans have moved in the opposite direction. Now, just as Thoreau predicted, many find that their possessions own them. They must work hard to earn enough money to buy and maintain the many possessions they consider necessities.
- 20 Yes, Americans love to make a lot of money and spend it on themselves—to buy things that save time, give them pleasure, or serve as status symbols. However, Americans are also very generous and very willing to donate money to good causes. The American character includes a strong sense of obligation to help those in need.
- 21 *Say What You Mean, and Mean What You Say.* Americans believe that "honesty is the best policy." They are direct and **assertive**. They ask for what they want. In many cultures, respect for those in positions of authority keeps people from expressing their true feelings or intentions. In the U.S.A., however, children often argue with their parents and citizens express opposition to actions of the government. If the soup is cold or the meat is tough, the diner can complain to the waiter. If a teacher is wrong or confusing, a student may say so. If the boss makes a mistake, an employee may politely point it out. Assertive behavior sometimes seems improper and rude to foreigners, but it works well for Americans. In fact, assertiveness is almost a necessity in the business world.
- 22 *The Need to Win.* The extremely competitive nature of Americans is often criticized. Of course, **competition** isn't always bad. In fact, it promotes excellence by encouraging individuals (and businesses) to try to do their best. But the desire to get ahead of others sometimes causes people to do things that are unkind and even dishonest.
- 23 *The Practical Outlook.* Americans admire what is practical, fast, **efficient**, and new. Sometimes they fail to appreciate cultures that prefer more traditional, leisurely ways of doing things. Conversely, people from other cultures may dislike the practical, hectic American lifestyle.

24 Despite these traits, which many foreigners may view as faults, Americans are usually considered very likable. Most are friendly, kind-hearted, and eager to help visitors and immigrants. In this nation of immigrants, the foreigner does not remain an outsider for long.

AFTER YOU READ

I. Getting the Message

Work with a partner. Put a check (✓) in the correct column for each phrase listed below.

	Americans like or approve of this.	Americans don't like or approve of this.
1. forming groups to bring about change		
2. wasting time		
3. allowing citizens to influence lawmakers		
4. allowing social mobility		
5. protesting social evils non-violently		
6. doing things the way they've always been done in the past		
7. making decisions by voting		
8. buying as few possessions as possible		
9. being assertive		
10. competing to be the winner or the best		

II. Building Your Vocabulary

A. These are the 15 key vocabulary words for this chapter. They are boldfaced in the reading. Pronounce these words after your teacher, and discuss their meanings.

assertive	demographer	majority
character*	diversity	materialistic
competition	efficient	minority
conservative†	ethnic	possession
democracy	generalize	variety

**Character* is uncountable as it's used in this chapter.

†*Conservative* can be a noun or an adjective.

B. With a partner, answer these questions with one word or a few words.

1. Would a materialistic person have many possessions or few? _____
2. Do elections usually involve competition? _____
3. Does a conservative person like or dislike a lot of change? _____
4. If people work quickly but do poor work, are they efficient? _____
5. What does a demographer study? _____
6. What is the main characteristic of a democracy? _____
7. What are two expensive possessions that most Americans want to own? _____

8. Do Americans think that it's good to be assertive? What do you think? _____

III. Sharpening Reading Skills

Topic Sentences A paragraph is a group of sentences that develops one idea. Most paragraphs contain a statement of the main idea. That statement is called the *topic sentence*. It is usually, but not always, the first sentence in the paragraph. It is the most important sentence in the paragraph. The other sentences develop the topic sentence, perhaps by giving reasons, causes, examples, facts, or descriptive details.

Reread the paragraphs listed and look for the topic sentence. Then write the first two words of the topic sentence on the line after the paragraph number.

Example

(3) The most

(5) _____

(8) _____

(17) _____

IV. Understanding Idioms and Expressions

Use the following 12 expressions to complete the sentences on page 9. Capitalize the first word at the beginning of a sentence. The numbers in parentheses give the paragraphs in which the expressions are used. Reread the paragraph if you have forgotten what the expression means.

“grassroots” movement (11)
keep up with the Joneses (19)
majority rule (8)
make every moment count (17)
mass production (7)
playing it safe (2)

point out (21)
senior citizen (11,14)
status symbol (20)
take it for granted (4)
taking charge (2)
vice versa (13)

1. My friend Joe rides his motorcycle 90 miles an hour. He doesn't believe in _____.
2. The twins expect their parents to give them a gift on their birthday. They _____.
3. Maria Johnson is very popular among the people in this state. In fact, there is a(n) _____ to elect her as the next governor.
4. They are a very happy couple. She loves him and _____.
5. Don't waste time. _____.
6. Teachers _____ mistakes so that students will learn the correct way to speak and write English.
7. An expensive car is a(n) _____. It makes the owner seem important.
8. My grandfather is 68 years old. Because he's a(n) _____, he gets a discount at many movie theaters.
9. _____ means that decisions are made by voting.
10. You don't have to buy a new car just because your friends did. You don't have to _____.
11. _____ helps to keep prices down.
12. John left the company, so Helen is _____ of the office now.

V. Taking Words Apart

Noun or Adjective Nouns serve as subjects of sentences and objects of verbs and prepositions. Adjectives are commonly used before nouns or after linking verbs (such as *be*, *seem*, and *feel*).

Underline the correct word form for each sentence.

1. The U.S. is a (*competition / competitive*) society.
2. Voting is an (*importance / important*) part of a democratic (*society / social*).
3. To have a successful democracy, it is (*necessity / necessary*) to have (*education / educated*) citizens.
4. To have a successful democracy, well-educated citizens are a (*necessity / necessary*).
5. Americans believe in (*equality / equal*) opportunity for all.
6. Most Americans understand the (*importance / important*) of participating in their (*democracy / democratic*) government.

(continued on the next page)

7. Americans are practical. In other words, they are (*pragmatism / pragmatic*).
8. Traveling from one (*region / regional*) of the country to another, American tourists see a great (*variety / varied*) of people and places.
9. There is a lot of (*ethnicity / ethnic*) (*diversity / diverse*) in the U.S.
10. Do Americans value money and possessions more than anything else? Are they (*materialism / materialistic*)?

What are four common endings on the nouns in this exercise? _____

What are four common endings on the adjectives in this exercise? _____

VI. Practicing Sentence Patterns

Dashes and Definitions

Reread the first and last sentences in paragraph 10. Note that dashes are used before definitions of the phrases American dream and social mobility. On the lines below, write two sentences that include definitions of a phrase.

1. Write a sentence with the definition at the end. Use one dash.

Example

I like cocoa—a hot drink with chocolate in it.

2. Write a sentence with the definition in the middle. Use two dashes.

Example

I drink cocoa—a hot drink with chocolate in it—every morning for breakfast.

VII. Sharing Ideas

A. Issues

Debate these issues in small groups. Then choose one and write about it.

1. Is there really equality of opportunity in the U.S.? If not, what can be done to create it?
2. What's good and what's bad about *majority rule*?
3. Americans are usually described as sociable, conventional people who join groups and try to behave like everyone else in the group. However, some American books and movies have made a hero of the person who fights the majority will and tries to accomplish something good independently. What's better—to be a *joiner* or a *loner*?