

The Values Americans Live By

By L. Robert Kohls

Most Americans would have a difficult time telling you, specifically, what the values are that Americans live by. They have never given the matter much thought.

Even if Americans had considered this question, they would probably, in the end, decide not to answer in terms of a definitive list of values. The reason for this decision is itself one very American value—their belief that every individual is so unique that the same list of values could never be applied to all, or even most, of their own citizens, so unique that the same list of values could never be applied to all, or even most, of their fellow citizens.

Although Americans may think of themselves as being more varied and unpredictable than they actually are, it is significant that they think they are. Americans tend to think they have been only slightly influenced by family, church or schools. In the end, each believes, "I personally chose which values I want to live my own life by."

Despite this self-evaluation, a foreign anthropologist could observe Americans and produce a list of common values that would fit most Americans. The list of typically American values would stand in sharp contrast to the values commonly held by the people of many other countries. We, the staff of the Washington International Center, have been introducing thousands of international visitors to life in the United States for more than a third of a century. This has caused us to try to look at Americans through the eyes of our visitors. We feel confident that the values listed here describe most (but not all) Americans.

Furthermore, we can say that if the foreign visitor really understood how deeply ingrained these 13 values are in Americans, he or she would then be able to understand 95% of American actions—action that might otherwise appear strange or unbelievable when evaluated from the perspective of the foreigner's own society and its values.

The different behaviors of a people or a culture make sense only when seen through the basic beliefs, assumptions and values of that particular group. When you encounter an action, or hear a statement in the United States that surprises you, try to see it as an expression of one or more of the values listed here. For example, when you ask Americans for directions to get to a particular address in their own city, they may explain, in great detail, how you can get there on your own, but may never even consider walking two city blocks with you to lead you to the place. Some foreign visitors have interpreted this sort of action as showing Americans' "unfriendliness." We would suggest, instead, that the self-help concept (value number 6 on our list), is so strong in Americans that they firmly believe that no adult would ever want, even temporarily, to be dependent on another. Also, their future orientation (value 8) makes Americans think it is better to prepare you to find other addresses on your own in the future.

Before proceeding to the list itself, we should also point out that Americans see all of these values as very positive ones. They are not aware, for example, that the people in many Third World countries view change (value 2) as negative or threatening. In fact all 13 of these American values are judged by many of the world's citizens as negative and undesirable. Therefore, it is not enough simply to familiarize yourself with these values. You must also, so far as possible, consider them without the negative or

derogatory connotation that they might have for you, based on your own experience and cultural identity.

It is important to state emphatically that our purpose in providing you with this list of the most important American values is not to convert you, the foreign visitor, to our values. We couldn't achieve that goal even if we wanted to, and we don't want to. We simply want to help you understand the Americans with whom you will be relating—from their own value system rather than from yours.

L. Robert Kohls, Executive Director
The Washington International Center
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1. PERSONAL CONTROL OVER THE ENVIRONMENT

Americans no longer believe in the power of Fate, and they have come to look at people who do as being backward, primitive, or hopelessly naïve. To be called "fatalistic" is one of the worst criticisms one can receive in the American context; to an American, it means one is superstitious and lazy, unwilling to take any initiative in bringing about improvement.

In the United States, people consider it normal and right that Man should control Nature, rather than the other way around. More specifically, people believe every single individual 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 in pursuing a better life.

Furthermore, it is considered normal that anyone should look out for his or her own self-interests first and foremost.

Most Americans find it impossible to accept that there are some things that lie beyond the power of humans to achieve. And Americans have literally gone to the moon, because they refused to accept earthly limitations.

Americans seem to be challenged, even compelled, to do, by one means or another (and often at great cost) what seven-eighths of the world is certain cannot be done.

2. CHANGE

In the American mind, change is seen as an indisputably good condition. Change is strongly linked to development, improvement, progress, and growth. Many older, more traditional cultures consider change as a disruptive, destructive force, to be avoided if at all possible. Instead of change, such societies value stability, continuity, tradition, and a rich and ancient heritage—none of which are valued very much in the United States.

These first two values—the belief that we can do anything and the belief that any change is good—together with an American belief in the virtue of hard work and the belief that each individual has a responsibility to do the best he or she can do have helped Americans achieve some great accomplishments. So whether these beliefs are true is really irrelevant; what is important is that Americans have considered them to be true and have acted as if they were, thus, in effect, causing them to happen.

3. TIME AND ITS CONTROL

Time is, for the average American, of utmost importance. To the foreign visitor, Americans seem to be more concerned with getting things accomplished on time (according to a predetermined schedule) than they are with developing deep interpersonal relations. Schedules, for the American, are meant to be planned and then followed in the smallest detail.

It may seem to you that most Americans are completely controlled by the little machines they wear on their wrists, cutting their discussions off abruptly to make it to their next appointment on time.

Americans' language is filled with references to time, giving a clear indication of how much it is valued. Time is something to be "on," to be "kept," "filled," "saved," "used," "spent," "wasted," "lost," "gained," "planned," "given," "made the most of," even "killed."

The international visitor soon learns that it is considered very rude to be late—even by 10 minutes—for an appointment in the United States. (Whenever it is absolutely impossible to be on time, you should phone ahead and tell the person you have been unavoidably detained and will be a half hour—or whatever—late.)

Time is so valued in America, because by considering time to be important one can clearly accomplish more than if one "wastes" time and does not keep busy. This philosophy has proven its worth. It has enabled Americans to be extremely productive, and productivity itself is highly valued in the United States. Many American proverbs stress the value in guarding our time, using it wisely, setting and working toward specific goals, and even expending our time and energy today so that the fruits of our labor may be enjoyed at a later time. (This latter concept is called "delayed gratification.")

4. EQUALITY/EGALITARIANISM

Equality is, for Americans, one of their most cherished values. This concept is so important for Americans that they have even given it a religious basis. They say all people have been "created equal." Most Americans believe that God views all humans alike without regard to intelligence, physical condition or economic status. In secular terms this belief is translated into the assertion that all people have an equal opportunity to succeed in life. Americans differ in opinion about how to make this ideal into a reality. Yet virtually all agree that equality is an important civic and social goal.

The equality concept often makes Americans seem strange to foreign visitors. Seven-eighths of the world feels quite differently. To them, rank and status and authority are seen as much more desirable considerations—even if they personally happen to find themselves near the bottom of the social order. Class and authority seem to give people in those other societies a sense of security and certainty. People outside the United States consider it reassuring to know, from birth, who they are and where they fit into the complex system called "society".

Many highly-placed foreign visitors to the United States are insulted by the way they are treated by service personnel such as waiters in restaurants, clerks in stores, taxi drivers, etc.). Americans have an aversion to treating people of high position in a deferential manner, and, conversely often treat lower class people as if they were very important. Newcomers to the United States should realize that no insult or personal

indignity is intended by this lack of deference to rank or position in society. A foreigner should be prepared to be considered "just like anybody else" while in the country.

5. INDIVIDUAL AND PRIVACY

The individualism that has been developed in the Western world since the Renaissance, beginning in the late 15th century, has taken its most exaggerated form in 20th century United States. Here, each individual is seen as completely and marvelously unique, that is, totally different from all other individuals and, therefore, particularly precious and wonderful.

Americans think they are more individualist in their thoughts and actions than, in fact, they are. They resist being thought of as representatives of a homogenous group, whatever the group. They may, and do, join groups—in fact many groups—but somehow believe they're just a little different, just a little unique, just a little special, from other members of the same group. And they tend to leave groups as easily as they enter them.

Privacy, the ultimate result of individualism is perhaps even more difficult for the foreigner to comprehend. The word "privacy" does not even exist in many languages. If it does, it is likely to have a strongly negative connotation, suggesting loneliness or isolation from the group. In the United States, privacy is not only seen as a very positive condition, but it is also viewed as a requirement that all humans would find equally necessary, desirable and satisfying. It is not uncommon for Americans to say—and believe—such statements as "If I don't have at least half an hour a day to myself, I will go stark raving mad."

Individualism, as it exists in the United States, does mean that you will find a much greater variety of opinions (along with the absolute freedom to express them anywhere and anytime) here. Yet, in spite of this wide range of personal opinion, almost all Americans will ultimately vote for one of the two major political parties. That is what was meant by the statement made earlier that Americans take pride in crediting themselves with claiming more individualism than, in fact, they really have.

6. SELF-HELP CONTROL

In the United States, a person can take credit only for what he or she has accomplished by himself or herself. Americans get no credit whatsoever for having been born into a rich family. (In the United States, that would be considered "an accident of birth.") Americans pride themselves in having been born poor and, through their own sacrifice and hard work, having climbed the difficult ladder of success to whatever level they have achieved—all by themselves. The American social system has, of course, made it possible for Americans to move, relatively easily, up the social ladder.

Take a look in an English-language dictionary at the composite words that have "self" as a prefix. In the average desk dictionary, there will be more than 100 such words, words like self-confidence, self-conscious, self-control, self-criticism, self-deception, self-defeating, self-denial, self-discipline, self-esteem, self-expression, self-importance, self-improvement, self-interest, self-reliance, self-respect, self-restraint, self-sacrifice—the list goes on and on. The equivalent of these words cannot be found in most other languages. The list is perhaps the best indication of how seriously Americans take doing things for one's self. The "self-made man or women" is still very much the ideal in 20th-century America.

7. COMPETITION AND FREE ENTERPRISE

Americans believe that competition brings out the best in any individual. They assert that it challenges or forces each person to produce the very best that is humanly possible. Consequently, the foreign visitor will see competition being fostered in the American home and in the American classroom, even on the youngest age level. Very young children, for instance, are encouraged to answer questions for which their classmates do not know the answer.

You may find the competitive value disagreeable, especially if you come from a society that promotes cooperation rather than competition. But many U.S. Peace Corps volunteers teaching in Third World countries found the lack of competitiveness in a classroom situation equally distressing. They soon learned that what they thought to be one of the universal human characteristics represented only a peculiarly American (or Western) value.

Americans, valuing competition, have devised an economic system to go with it—free enterprise. Americans feel strongly that a highly competitive economy will bring out the best in its people and, ultimately, that the society that fosters competition will progress most rapidly. If you look for it, you will see evidence in all areas—even in fields as diverse as medicine, the arts, education, and sports—that free enterprise is the approach most often preferred in America.

8. FUTURE ORIENTATION

Valuing the future and the improvements Americans are sure the future will bring means that they devalue that past and are, to a large extent, unconscious of the present. Even a happy present goes largely unnoticed because, happy as it may be, Americans have traditionally been hopeful that the future would bring even greater happiness. Almost all energy is directed toward realizing that better future. At best, the present condition is seen as preparatory to a latter and greater event, which will eventually culminate in something even more worthwhile.

Since Americans have been taught (in value 1) to believe that Man, and not Fate, can and should be the one who controls the environment, this has made them very good at planning and executing short-term projects. This ability, in turn, has caused Americans to be invited to all corners of the earth to plan and achieve the miracles that their goal setting can produce.

If you come from a culture such as those in the traditional Moslem world, where talking about or actively planning the future is felt to be a futile, even sinful, activity, you will have not only philosophical problems with this very American characteristic but religious objections as well. Yet it is something you will have to learn to live with, for all around you Americans will be looking toward the future and what it will bring.

9. ACTION/WORK ORIENTATION

"Don't just stand there," goes a typical bit of American advice, "do something!" This expression is normally used in a crisis situation, yet, in a sense, it describes most American's entire waking life, where action—any action—is seen to be superior to inaction. Americans routinely plan and schedule an extremely active day. Any relaxation must be limited in time, pre-planned, and aimed at "recreating" their ability to work

harder and more productively once the recreation is over. Americans believe leisure activities should assume a relatively small portion of one's total life. People think that it is "sinful" to "waste one's time," "to sit around doing nothing," or just to "daydream."

Such a "no nonsense" attitude toward life has created many people who have come to be known as "workaholics," or people who are addicted to their work, who think constantly about their jobs and who are frustrated if they are kept away from them, even during their evening hours and weekends.

The workaholic syndrome, in turn, causes Americans to identify themselves wholly with their professions. The first question one American will ask another American when meeting for the first time is related to his or her work: "Where do you work?," or "Who (what company) are you with?"

And when such a person finally goes on vacation, even the vacation will be carefully planned, very busy and active.

America may be one of the few countries in the world where it seems reasonable to speak about the "dignity of human labor," meaning by that, hard, physical labor. In America, even corporation presidents will engage in physical labor from time to time and gain, rather than lose, respect from others for such action.

10. INFORMALITY

If you come from a more formal society, you will likely find Americans to be extremely informal, and will probably feel that they are even disrespectful of those in authority. Americans are one of the most informal and casual people in the world, even when compared to their near relative—the Western European.

As one example of this informality, American bosses often urge their employees to call them by their first names and even feel uncomfortable if they are called by the title "Mr." or "Mrs."

Dress is another area where American informality will be most noticeable, perhaps even shocking. One can go to a symphony performance, for example, in any large American city nowadays and find some people in the audience dressed in blue jeans and tie less, short-sleeved shirts.

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

If you are a highly placed official in your own country, you will probably, at first, find such informality to be very unsettling. American, on the other hand, would consider such informality as a compliment! Certainly it is not intended as an insult and should not be taken as such.

11. DIRECTNESS, OPENNESS AND HONESTY

Many other countries have developed subtle, sometimes highly ritualistic, ways of informing other people of unpleasant information. Americans, however, have always preferred the first approach. They are likely to be completely honest in delivering their negative evaluations. If you come from a society that uses the indirect manner of conveying bad news or uncomplimentary evaluations, you will be shocked at Americans' bluntness.

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. It is important to realize that an American would not, in such case, lose face. The burden of adjustment, in all cases while you are in this country, will be on you. There is no way to soften the blow of such directness and openness if you are not used to it except to tell you that the rules have changed while you are here. Indeed, Americans are trying to urge their fellow countrymen to become even more open and direct. The large number of "assertiveness" training courses that appeared in the United States in the late 1970s reflects such a commitment.

Americans consider anything other than the most direct and open approach to be dishonest and insincere and will quickly lose confidence in and distrust anyone who hints at what is intended rather than saying it outright.

Anyone who, in the United States, chooses to use an intermediary to deliver that message will also be considered manipulative and untrustworthy.

12. PRACTICALITY AND EFFICIENCY

Americans have a reputation of being an extremely realistic, practical and efficient people. The practical consideration is likely to be given highest priority in making any important decision in the United States. 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 any money? Will it "pay its own way?" What can I gain from this activity? These are the kinds of questions that Americans are likely to ask in their practical pursuit, not such questions as: Is it aesthetically pleasing? Will it be enjoyable? or Will it advance the cause of knowledge?

This practical, 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, for example, are much more popular in the United States than philosophy or anthropology, law and medicine more valued than the arts.

Another way in which this favoring of the practical makes itself felt in the United States, is a belittling of "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 merits." The popular American "trial-and-error" approach to problem solving also reflects the practical. The approach suggests listing several possible solutions to any given problem, then trying them out, one-by-one, to see which is most effective.

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 always result from hard work and serious intent—a reward, they think, that all people could enjoy were they as industrious and hard working as Americans.

But by any standard, Americans are materialistic. This means that they value and collect more material objects than most people would ever dream of owning. It also

means they give higher priority to obtaining, maintaining and protecting their material objects than they do in developing and enjoying interpersonal relationships.

The modern American typically owns:

one or more color television sets,
an electric hair dryer,
an electronic calculator,
a tape recorder and a record player,
a clothes-washer and dryer,
a vacuum cleaner,
a powered lawn mower (for cutting grass),
a refrigerator, a stove, and a dishwasher,
one or more automobiles,
and a telephone. Many also own a personal computer.

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 trading it in for another one.

SUMMARY

Now that we have discussed each of these 13 values separately, if all too briefly, let us look at them in list form (on the left) and then consider them paired with the counterpart values from a more traditional country (on the right):

U.S. Values

Personal Control over the Environment
Change
Time & Its Control
Equality
Individualism/Privacy
Self-Help
Competition
Future Orientation
Action/Work Orientation
Informality
Directness/Openness/Honesty
Practicality/Efficiency
Materialism/Acquisitiveness

Some Other Countries' Values

Fate
Tradition
Human Interaction
Hierarchy/Rank/Status
Group's Welfare
Birthright/Inheritance
Cooperation
Past/Present Orientation
"Being" Orientation
Formality
Indirectness/Ritual/Face
Idealism
Spirituality/Detachment

Which list more nearly represents the values of your native country?

APPLICATION

Before leaving this discussion of the values Americans live by, consider how knowledge of these values explains many things about Americans.

One can, for example, see America's impressive record of scientific and technological achievement as a natural result of these 13 values.

First of all, it was necessary to believe (1) these things could be achieved, that Man does not have to simply sit and wait for Fate to bestow them or not to bestow them, and that Man does have control over his own environment, if he is willing to take it. Other values that have contributed to this record of achievement include (2) an expectation of positive results to come from change (and the acceptance of an ever-faster rate of change as "normal"); (3) the necessity to schedule and plan one's time; (6) the self-help concept; (7) competition; (8) future orientation; (9) action work orientation; (12) practicality; and (13) materialism.

You can do the same sort of exercise as you consider other aspects of American society and analyze them to see which of the 13 values described here apply. By using this approach you will soon begin to understand Americans and their actions. And as you come to understand them, they will seem less "strange" than they did at first.