

# THE VALUES AMERICANS LIVE BY

Excerpted from "The Values Americans Live By", L. Robert Kohls, The Washington International Center, April 1984.

Although Americans like to think of themselves as uniquely individualistic, one can produce a list of common values that fit most Americans, a list which stands in sharp contrast to the values commonly held by people of many other countries. Although Americans represent less than six percent of the world's population, their impact on other countries and cultures as a result of these values is enormous.

By understanding American values, the *International Student* can better understand actions which might otherwise appear strange, confusing, or unbelievable when evaluated from the perspective of their own culture and values. By understanding these values, the *American student going overseas* might better appreciate the differences they see, and not judge them as wrong or bad, but rather as different from their own culture and values.

## **1. Personal Control Over One's Future**

Americans do not believe in Fate, and look at those who do as being backward or naive. To be called "fatalistic" means to an American they are superstitious, lazy, and unwilling to take the initiative to bring about improvements.

In the United States people consider it normal and right that Man should control Nature, rather than the other way around. They believe that one's problems are not a result of bad luck as much as having come from one's laziness in pursuing a better life; one does not have to bear what life hands out. Furthermore, it is considered normal that one should look out for his or her own self-interest first and foremost.

Most Americans find it impossible to accept that there are some things that lie beyond the power of humans to achieve. A problem is not something to be accepted; it is something to be attacked. 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 very valued in the United States.

These first two values - the belief that we can do anything and the belief that 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 than they are with developing deep interpersonal relations. Schedules, for the American, are meant to be planned and then followed in the smallest detail. 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", "spent", "wasted", "lost", "gained", "planned", "given", "made the more 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 enabled Americans to be extremely productive, and productivity itself is highly valued in the United States. Many Americans stress the value in using time 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 (called "delayed gratification").

### **4. Equality**

Equality, for Americans, is one of their most cherished values. This concept is so important for Americans that they have incorporated it into their laws, saying all people have been "created equal". Most Americans believe that all humans should be viewed without regard to intelligence, physical condition, or economic status. This translates into the assertion that all people have an equality of opportunity to succeed, but not that all people are equal in abilities. 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.

Seven-eighths of the world feels quite differently. To them, rank, 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 a way of treating people of high position in an indifferent manner. Newcomers to the United States should realize that no insult or personal indignity is intended by this lack of difference to rank or position in society. A foreigner should be prepared to be considered "just like anybody else" while in the country.

## **5. Individualism and Privacy**

In the United States each individual is seen as completely and marvelously unique, that is, totally different from all other individuals. Americans think they are more individualistic than, in fact, they are. They may join groups, and do in fact join 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 which 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".

Americans are friendly on the surface, but hard to know intimately. They enjoy companionship, but do not offer - or expect to receive - deep intimacy or total commitment. The rapid pace and enormous mobility of American society makes lifelong friendships difficult.

Individualism, as it exists in the United States, means you will find a much greater variety of opinions (along with the absolute freedom to express them anywhere and anytime). Yet, in spite of this wide range of personal opinion, almost all Americans will ultimately vote for one of the two major political parties. Americans take pride in crediting themselves with claiming more individualism than, in fact, they may have.

## **6. Self-Help Concept**

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 whatever for having been born into a rich family. 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 the word "self" as a prefix, words like self-confidence, self-conscious, self-contented, self-control, self-denial, self-discipline, self-esteem, self-improvement, self-interest, self-respect, self-restraint, - the list goes on and on. The equivalent of these words cannot be found in most other languages. This list is perhaps the best indication of how seriously Americans take doing things for one's self.

American children are encouraged to become self-reliant as early in life as possible. This attitude of independence often impels elderly or retired people to live by themselves. The self-made man or woman is still very much the ideal in the United States.

## **7. Competition and Free Enterprise**

Americans believe that competition brings out the best in any individual. They assert that challenge forces every person to produce their very best. Consequently, the foreign visitor will see competition being fostered in the American home and classroom, even at the youngest age levels.

You may find this competitiveness 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 had thought to be one of the universal human characteristics represented only a peculiarly American 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 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 they devalue the 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 is directed toward realizing that better future. At best, the present condition is seen as preparatory to a later 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 which 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 not only have 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 sit there”, goes a typical bit of American advice, “do something!” This expression describes most Americans’ entire waking life, where action - any action - is seen to be superior to inaction. Americans don’t seem to care what the activity is so long as it offers them a sense of involvement, achievement and the hope for improving their surroundings. This has led to a strong volunteer society with an extraordinary willingness to cooperate without tangible reward.

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 life. People think that it is sinful to waste one's time or to sit around doing nothing.

Such a “no nonsense” attitude toward life has created many people who have come to be known as “workaholics” (people who are addicted to their work), who think constantly about their job, and who are frustrated if they are kept away from it, even during evening hours and weekends. The hard-driving and competitive attitude 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: “What do you do?” or “Where do you work?” And when such a person finally goes on vacation, even the vacation will be carefully planned, very busy and active.

## **10. Informality**

If you come from a more formal society, you will likely find Americans to be extremely informal and possibly 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, short-sleeved shirts, and no tie. Informality is also apparent in American 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. Americans, 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 direct 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 American 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. 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. Indeed, Americans are trying to urge their fellow countrymen to become even more open and direct. The large number of “assertiveness” training courses in the United States 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 and distrust in 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 the 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.

Will it make any money? 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? 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.

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. For problem solving, they list several possible solutions to the given problem, then try 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 which result from hard work, a reward all people can enjoy if they are industrious and hard-working.

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 relations.

The modern American typically owns:

- \* one or more color television sets,
- \* an electric hair dryer,
- \* an electronic calculator,
- \* a stereo,
- \* a clothes washer and dryer,
- \* a vacuum cleaner,
- \* a power lawn mower for cutting grass,
- \* a refrigerator, stove, and 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, and consider them paired with their counterpart values from a more traditional country.

<b>U. S. VALUES</b>	<b>SOME OTHER COUNTRY'S VALUES</b>
Personal Control Over One's Future	Fate
Change	Tradition
Time and Its Control	Human Interaction
Equality	Hierarchy/Rank/Status
Individualism/Privacy	Group's Welfare
Self-Help	Birthright Inheritance
Competition	Cooperation
Future Orientation	Past Orientation
Action/Work Orientation	"Being" Orientation
Informality	Formality
Directness/Openness/Honesty	Indirectness/Ritual/Fate
Practicality/Efficiency	Idealism
Materialism/Acquisitiveness	Spiritualism/Detachment

Which list more nearly represents your values?