

CULTURE OF USA

Introduction

The culture of the United States is a Western culture, and has been developing since long before the United States became a country. Today the United States is a diverse and multi-cultural nation. Its chief early influence was British culture, due to colonial ties with the British that spread the English language, legal system and other cultural inheritances. Other important influences came from other parts of Europe, especially countries from which large numbers immigrated such as Ireland, Germany, Poland, and Italy; the Native American peoples; Africa, especially the western part, from which came the ancestors of most African Americans; and young groups of immigrants. American culture also has shared influence on the cultures of its neighbors in the New World.

The United States has traditionally been known as a melting pot, but recent left leaning academics tend towards cultural diversity, pluralism and the image of a salad bowl rather than a melting pot. Due to the extent of American culture there are many integrated but unique subcultures within the United States. The cultural affiliations an individual in the United States may have commonly depend on social class, political orientation and a multitude of demographic characteristics such as ancestral traditions, sex and sexual orientation. The strongest influences on American culture came from northern European cultures, most prominently from Germany, Ireland and Poland. There are great regional and subcultural differences, making American culture mostly heterogeneous.

Taboos in America

A taboo is commonly defined as something that is forbidden by a specific society. There are many taboo topics in America that are not normally discussed. For example, a bride who is noticeably pregnant on her wedding day was historically considered a taboo topic that was quietly whispered about but not officially acknowledged.

a. Religion

Religion can be a taboo topic in America. The United States is generally known as a melting pot of people from all over the world. This wide variety of people brings with them not only their belongings but their religious beliefs. Many faiths that have come to America, including the Islam, Catholicism, Judaism and Hinduism, among many others. These faiths are often parodied in movies and by comedians because of the taboo involved in poking fun at another person's beliefs.

b. Polygamy

Polygamy is when one person has more than one spouse at the same time. It is also a topic that is not spoken out loud about very much due in real life to its illicit nature. Polygamy was often practiced in the Mormon religion in Utah until it was made illegal in the late 1800s. Polygamy continues to be practiced today by some splinter Mormon groups and other cults, though it is still very much a taboo to practice today--not to mention that it is still illegal in all 50 states.

c. Abortion

The topic of abortion can be very emotional for some people. There can be strong opinions on both sides of this issue, and generally no middle ground exists. The topic is frequently written about in newspapers and discussed by politicians. However, it is normally not brought up in casual conversations, and it is taboo to ask women if they have ever had one.

d. Pedophilia

The legal definition of pedophilia includes the molestation of, taking pictures of and exposing one's private parts to a child. These acts are seen as morally reprehensible, and pedophiles are often ostracized by communities. Normally this emotional issue is seen as taboo in a casual conversation or even as part of a comedy act.

e. Incest

Incest, defined as intimate relations between two people who are closely related to each other, is generally not a topic for casual conversation. It is commonly viewed as a morally wrong behavior, and is not only a taboo in America but all across the world. The taboo against incest has a biological

underpinning--offspring produced by closely related parents are more prone to genetic abnormalities, so as human societies evolved, those who frowned on incest tended to survive better than those who allowed it, eventually leading to a general taboo against incest.

f. Race

Negative remarks regarding someone's race can be seen as a taboo topic in the United States. Even though such words or phrases may be a part of pop culture, it is still commonly frowned on to use them in casual conversation.

1. Pointing at people
2. Chewing with your mouth open
3. Staring at someone for a long period of time
4. Being late
5. When handing someone a sharp object you point the dull end towards them and the sharp end towards you. It is rude to hand someone something with the sharp edge toward them
6. Sticking your middle finger up
7. Calling adults by their first name
8. Rolling your eyes
9. Not looking at someone when they are talking to you
10. Cracking or popping your knuckles
11. Touching without permission

For those of you wishing to make a trip to the states here are some bits about American culture that will make your life easier. Americans are fairly easygoing and if they know you are a tourist or new to the country, they will usually be happy to help you and understand. Most Americans are friendly and open minded, you should make sure to get to know them completely before you judge them. And remember, each State has its own culture so it is best to do some research if you are going to a specific state.

- 1) Always say 'Please' and 'Thank you' and 'Excuse me', Americans respect good manners

- 2) Learn your English. Americans like to be able to understand you so speaking the native language and without a terribly thick accent is important. If you do not know everything, that is ok. But you have to speak clearly so everyone can hear what your saying is important.
- 3) Do not dish out country and culture. Americans are proud of their country, culture and their people.
- 4) They are not very physically affectionate. They usually do not go past a handshake but they are just not to affectionate. They respect personal space. If you are uncomfortable with being touched, speak up (and hold your ground if you happen to get someone difficult). If someone says they are not comfortable with you being affectionate to them (kissing, hugging other forms of touching) please respect this, once they warm up to you they might accept it.
- 5) Here are some other manners that will help you integrate as well. Make sure you tip the minimum 15% for services rendered, especially to restaurant wait staff, it's not included and most low paying jobs are supplemented by tips.

Here are the main discussions about American culture in some aspects.

1. Variations
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1. Variations

Variation in the majority traditions occur due to class, ancestral, religious, regional and other groups of people. Cultural differences in the various regions of the United States are explored in New England, Mid-Atlantic States, Southern United States, Midwestern United States, Southwest United States, Western United States and Pacific Northwestern United States pages. The western coast of the continental US consisting of California, Oregon, and the state of Washington are also sometimes referred to as the Left Coast, indicating its political orientation and tendency towards liberal norms, folkways and values. Strong cultural differences have a long history in the US with the southern slave society in the antebellum period serving as a prime example. Not only social, but also economic tensions between the Northern and Southern states were so severe that they eventually caused the South to declare

itself an independent nation, the Confederate States of America; thus provoking the American civil war.

Examples of the great variations in norms, values and beliefs found across the United States can be found in the legal policies of some states. The state of California for example has passed environmental reforms and regulations rivaling those of Western Europe. With recent legislation California has become the only part of the United States with mandatory caps on greenhouse gas emission. Policy regarding human sexuality further indicated tremendous differences across the nation. In early 2003, 14 US states had sodomy laws, before the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in *Lawrence v. Texas*. Roughly one year later the Massachusetts allowed couples to obtain same-sex matrimony licenses. As laws represent a society's most profound and strictly held social norms and mores, great variations in laws reflect cultural variations as well.

2. Body Contact and Personal Expression

In terms of body contact and personal space the United States shows considerable similarities to northern and central European regions, such as Germany, the Benelux, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. The main difference is, however, that Americans like to keep more open space in between them and their conversation partners (roughly 4 feet compared to 2 to 3 feet in Europe). Greeting rituals tend to be the same in these regions and in the United States, consisting of minimal body contact which often remains confined to a simple handshake. In 1966 Anthropologist Edward Hall identified four different zones of personal space Americans like to keep around them:

Intimate distance: extends roughly 18 inches (45.7 cm) from the individual and is reserved for family, pets and very close friends. Displays of affection and comforting are commonly conducted within this space. The only strangers an individual typically accepts within his or her intimate space are health care professionals.

Personal distance: extends 4 to 5 feet (1.2 - 1.5 meters) is reserved for friends and acquaintances. A handshake will typically place strangers at least 2 to 4 feet apart, preserving the personal distance.

Social distance: extends from about 4 to 12 feet (1.2 - 3.7 meters) and is used for formal, business and other impersonal interactions such as meeting a client.

Public Space: extends more than 12 feet (3.7 meters) and is not guarded. Secret Service agents will commonly attempt to ensure 12 feet of open space around dignitaries and high ranking officials.

The toleration for body expression that deviates from the mainstream such as complete body tattoos or nudism is strongly linked to the sub-culture and location in which an individual may find him or her. Generally speaking the United States tends to be less tolerant towards nudity than Western Europe, even in more tolerant areas such as California. As stated above the tolerance shown for personal expression such as cross-dressing, piercing, etc... Varies greatly with location and sub-culture and may be completely appropriate in one venue while being taboo in another. As a result a form of expression or behavior that might be completely acceptable in San Francisco's Castro District might be offensive in a Wichita suburb. In early 2003 for example, the city of San Francisco and later the city of Portland allowed same-sex couples to express their mutual affection through the act of legally recognized marriage. As these marriages deviated too far from the majority sentiment at the time, however, the issuing of gay marriage licenses was stopped through court order. These events in early 2003 illustrate the great differences in what is acceptable in different parts of the United States.

3. Social Class

Social class is perhaps the greatest cultural influence on persons in the United States. Nearly all cultural aspects of mundane interactions and consumer behavior in the US are guided by a person's location within the country's social structure. While American society is commonly divided into three or five socio-economic classes, there may be many more distinct groups that could be identified as constituting social classes. Social class is generally described as a combination of educational attainment, income and occupational prestige. There are, however, no clearly defined class boundaries and the nature of any class limits remains arbitrary.

"It is impossible to understand people's behavior... without the concept of social stratification, because class position has a pervasive influence on almost

everything that we think or do. Our religious beliefs are affected by class. So is political affiliation... the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, and the television shows we watch. Even the most trivial matters are influenced by class, such as the colors we paint our homes and the names we give our pets." -William E. Thompson & Joseph V. Hickey, Society in Focus, 2005.

Even though most Americans today identify themselves as middle class, American society and its culture are considerably more fragmented. If applied to include the majority of Americans, the term middle class would include white collar professionals such as economists with a median income of \$72,000 alongside medical assistants with a median income of \$24,610. American society is generally divided into five social classes, each with its own sub-culture. The most commonly identified classes are the upper class which consists of multiple corporate and social elites, the upper middle class which consists of highly educated white collar professionals, the middle class which largely consists of so called "Para-professionals" (Thompson & Hickey, 2005) with some college education or a Bachelor's degree, the working class (or lower middle class) which includes closely supervised clerical pink and blue collar workers, and the lower class which consists of those with the lowest incomes, lowest educational attainments and least prestigious occupations.

"Everyone wants to believe they are middle class. For people on the bottom and the top of the wage scale the phrase connotes a certain Regular Joe cachet. But this eagerness to be part of the group has led the definition to be stretched like a bungee cord"- Dante Chinni, the Christian Science Monitor

Each of these commonly identified social classes feature distinct lifestyles, consumption patterns and values. Early sociologist-economist Thorstein Veblen, for example, noted that those at the very top of the social ladder engage in conspicuous leisure as well as conspicuous consumption. Upper middle class persons commonly identify education and being cultured as prime values. Persons in this particular social class tend to speak in a more direct manner that projects authority, knowledge and thus credibility. They often tend to engage in the consumption of so-called mass

luxuries, such as designer label clothing. A strong preference for natural materials and organic foods as well as a strong health consciousness tend to be prominent features of the upper middle class. Middle class individuals in general value expanding one's horizon, partially because they are more educated and can afford greater leisure and travels. Working class individuals take great pride in doing what they consider to be "real work," and keep very close-knit kin networks that serve as a safeguard against frequent economic instability. Working class Americans as well as many of those in the middle class may also face occupation alienation. In contrast to upper middle class professionals who are mostly hired to conceptualize, supervise and share their thoughts, many Americans enjoy only little autonomy or creative latitude in the workplace. As a result white collar professionals tend to be significantly more satisfied with their work. More recently those in the center of the income strata, who may still identify as middle class, have faced increasing economic insecurity, supporting the idea of a working class majority.

4. Class Factors and Politics

Income remains one of the main indicators of class, as it commonly reflects high educational attainment as well as a prestigious occupation. Today there remains a strong correlation, if not causation, between political activism as well as political representation and household income. Furthermore, a discrepancy in the political attitudes can be found among individuals residing in households with differing incomes. During the 2000 election voter turnout among those in the top 26% with household incomes exceeding \$75,000 were 27% more likely to vote than the average. Some rather controversial issues such as race were impacted by household income. With higher voter turn-out and affiliation with professional organizations and other popular political lobbies such as the AARP or NAACP, those with higher incomes were more likely to be represented in the political process with the government being more attuned to their needs.

Education also has an effect on voting record. Generally, the more educated a person is, the more likely he or she is to vote with those having graduate degrees being more likely to vote Democrat. While a rise in income generally increase the likelihood of a person voting Republican, many upper middle class professionals with

post-graduate degrees are more likely to vote Democrat. The presence of upper middle class liberals as household with incomes exceeding \$100,000 and those with graduate degrees were the only demographics where Ralph Nader won 1% of the vote. Even though those with post-graduate degrees only constituted 8.9% of the general population, they constituted 16% of all voters. This means that the most highly educated 16% of voters were expected to vote Democrat even though most of their similarly high paid but lesser educated counterparts did not.

5. Health and Income

Income also had a significant impact on health as those with higher incomes had better access to health care facilities, higher life expectancy, lower infant mortality rate and increased health consciousness. While the United States lacks socialized medicine similar to that found in many other post-industrialized developed nations across Europe and Asia, 85% of the US population was insured in 2005. Yet, discrepancies seem to remain beyond the difference between insured and uninsured. In 2006 Harvard researchers divided the US into "eight Americas." Life expectancy ranges from 84.9 years for the 10,400,000 Asian Americans who had an average per capita income of \$21,566. Urban African Americans with an average per capita income of a mere \$14,800 had a life expectancy of merely 71.1 years. Furthermore, the United States like other post-industrial nations saw increased health consciousness among persons of higher social status. Persons of higher status are less likely to smoke, more likely to exercise regularly and be more conscious of their diet. Additionally, poor Americans are more likely to consume lower quality, processed foods. One can therefore conclude that low socio-economic status contributes to a person's likelihood of being obese. One does of course, need to note than any statements or research connecting health consciousness and income are generalizations, as are most other statements made in regards to the diverse culture of the United States.

6. Labeling

Residents of the United States of America commonly refer to themselves and each other as Americans, and to their country as the United States, the States, the

U.S., U.S.A., U.S. of A., or simply America. The nation's name as used in its founding documents, "United States of America" is less commonly used and is reserved almost exclusively to official usage. Other means of self-referencing may be utilized among the 20% of the population whose native language is not English.

In other countries, including many western European countries, the United States is commonly referred to as "America" and its people as "Americans". While some foreigners may use the term "Yankees" as a synonym for the American people, Americans themselves almost always use the term for either the sports team, New Englanders, New Yorkers, or simply those who live in the Northern States that sided with the Union Army during the American Civil War. The US may also be referred to as "the States."

When discussing the American Civil War, Americans use the phrase "the Union" to refer to the states that remained under the control of the federal government in Washington and did not secede to join the Confederate States of America. The phrase is also occasionally used in contemporary discussions of American federalism and states' rights. Immediately after the American Civil War and for a generation afterward, the entire country was then referred to as "the Republic". This nineteenth century usage has since declined, except when invoking issues of civics and governance, such as in the Pledge of Allegiance uttered by school children and in town meetings.

Other ways of self-referencing may be used among certain sub-cultural groups within the United States. African Americans for example have exhibited a tendency to emphasize their racial heritage when referring to one another. Doing so may represent a strong collective group identity.

7. Race

Race in the United States is based on physical characteristics and skin color and has played an essential part in shaping American society even before the nation's conception. Until the civil rights movement of the 1960s racial minorities in the United States faced discrimination and social as well as economic marginalization. Today the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of the Census recognized four races, Native American or American Indian, African American, Asian

and White. Hispanic Americans do not technically according to the US Government, constitute a race but rather an ethnic group. During the 2000 US Census Whites made up 75.1% of the population with those being Hispanic or Latino constituting the nation's prevalent minority with 12.5% of the population. African Americans made up 12.3% of the total population, 3.6% were Asian American and 0.7% was Native American.

Until the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified on December 6th 1865 the United States was a slave society. While the northern states had outlawed slavery in their territory in the late 18th and early 19th century their industrial economies relied on the raw materials produced by slave labor. Following the Reconstruction period in the 1870s, Southern states initialized an apartheid regulated by Jim Crow laws that provided for legal segregation. Lynching occurred throughout the US until the 1930s, continuing well into the civil rights movement in the South. Asian Americans were also marginalized during much of US history. Between 1882 and 1943 the United States government instituted the Chinese Exclusion Act which prohibited Chinese immigrants from entering the nation. During the Second World War roughly 120,000 Japanese Americans, 62% of whom were US citizens, were imprisoned in Japanese internment camps. Hispanic American also faced segregation and other types of discrimination. Despite being considered White in many states such as California, Hispanics were regularly subject to second class citizen status.

Largely as a result of being de jure or de facto excluded and marginalized from so-called mainstream society, racial minorities in the United States developed their own unique sub-cultures. During the 1920s for example, Harlem, New York became home to the Harlem Renaissance. Music styles such as Jazz, Blues and Rap as well as numerous folk-songs such as Blue Tail Fly (Jimmy Crack Corn) originated within the realms of African American culture. Chinatowns can be found in many cities across the nation and Asian cuisine has become a common staple in America. The Hispanic community has also had a dramatic impact on American culture. Today, Catholics are the largest religious denomination in the United States and out-number Protestants in the South-west and California. Mariachi music and Mexican cuisine are commonly found throughout the south-west with some Latino dishes such Burritos

and Tacos being found anywhere in the nation. Economic discrepancies and de-facto segregation, however, continue and is a prominent feature of mundane life in the United States. While Asian Americans have prospered and have a median household income and educational attainment far exceeding that of Whites, the same cannot be said for the other racial minorities. African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans have considerably lower income and education than do White Americans. In 2005 the median household income of Whites was 62.5% higher than that of African American, nearly one-quarter of whom live below the poverty line. Furthermore 46.9% of homicide victims in the United States are African American indicating the many severe socio-economic problems African Americans and minorities in general continue to face in the twenty-first century.

8. Group Affiliations

As the United States is a very diverse nation, it is home to numerous organization and social groups and individuals may derive their group affiliated identity from a variety of sources. Many Americans, especially white collar professionals belong to professional organizations such as the APA, ASA or ATFLC, although books like *Bowling Alone* indicate that Americans affiliate with these sorts of groups less often than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, Americans derive a great deal of their identity through their work and professional affiliation, especially among individuals higher on the economic ladder. Recently professional identification has led to many clerical and low-level employees giving their occupations new, more respectable titles, such as "Sanitation service engineer" instead of "Janitor." Additionally many Americans belong to non-profit organizations and religious establishments and may volunteer their services to such organizations. The Rotary Club, the Knights of Columbus or even the SPCA is examples of such non-profit and mostly volunteer run organizations. Ethnicity plays another important role in providing Americans with group identity, especially among those who recently immigrated. Many American cities are home to ethnic enclaves such as a Chinatown and Little Italies remain in some cities. Local patriotism may be also providing group identity. For example, a person may be particularly proud to be from California or New York City, and may display clothing from local sports team. Political lobbies such as the

AARP not only provide individuals with a sentiment of intra-group allegiance but also increase their political representation in the nation's political system. Combined, profession, ethnicity, religious, and other group affiliations have provided Americans with a multitude of options from which to derive their group based identity.

9. Food

A hamburger is a famous food in the United States. The types of food served at home vary greatly and depend upon the region of the country and the family's own cultural heritage. Recent immigrants tend to eat food similar to that of their country of origin, and Americanized versions of these cultural foods, such as American Chinese cuisine or Italian-American cuisine often eventually appear. German cuisine also had a profound impact on American cuisine, especially the mid-western cuisine, with potatoes and meat being the most iconic ingredients in both cuisines. Dishes such as the hamburger, pot roast, baked ham and hot dogs are examples of American dishes derived from German cuisine.

Mainstream American culinary arts are similar to those in other Western countries. Wheat is the primary cereal grain. Traditional American cuisine uses ingredients such as turkey, white-tailed deer venison, potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, squash, and maple syrup, indigenous foods employed by Native Americans and early European settlers. Slow-cooked pork and beef barbecue, crab cakes, potato chips, and chocolate chip cookies are distinctively American styles. Soul food, developed by African slaves, is popular around the South and among many African Americans elsewhere. Syncretic cuisines such as Louisiana creole, Cajun, and Tex-Mex are regionally important. Iconic American dishes such as apple pie, fried chicken, pizza, hamburgers, and hot dogs derive from the recipes of various immigrants. So-called French fries, Mexican dishes such as burritos and tacos, and pasta dishes freely adapted from Italian sources are widely consumed. Americans generally prefer coffee to tea, with more than half the adult population drinking at least one cup a day. Marketing by U.S. industries is largely responsible for making orange juice and milk (now often fat-reduced) ubiquitous breakfast beverages. During the 1980s and 1990s, Americans' caloric intake rose 24%; frequent dining at fast food outlets is associated with what health officials call the American "obesity epidemic." Highly

sweetened soft drinks are widely popular; sugared beverages account for 9% of the average American's daily caloric intake.

10. Work

Today, as in other post-industrial societies, most Americans are employed in the service sector. The majority of workers may therefore be referred to as White collar. In the United States occupation is one of the prime factors of social class and is closely linked to an individual's identity. The average work week in the US for those employed full-time was 42.9 hours long with 30% of the population working more than 40 hours a week. It should be noted, however, that many of those in the top two earning quintiles often worked more than 50 a week. The Average American worker earned \$16.64 an hour in the first two quarters of 2006. Overall Americans worked more than their counterparts in other developed post-industrial nations. While the average worker in Denmark enjoyed 30 days of vacation annually, the average American only had 16 annual vacation days. In 2000 the average American worked 1,978 hours per year, 500 hours more than the average German, yet 100 hours less than the average Czech. Overall the US labor force was the most productive in the world (overall, not by hour worked), largely due to its workers working more than those in any other post-industrial country (excluding South Korea). Americans generally hold working and being productive in high regard and being busy as well as working extensively may also serves as the means to obtain esteem.

11. Relationship to other Countries/Cultures

Americans tend to be less inclined to visit other countries than citizens of European and other Western nations. This partly results from intercontinental travel entailing further distances than Europeans. The average American worker has fewer vacation days than the average European (10-15 rather than the European average of around 20). America's vast size allows its citizens to go great distances, and see a variety of places, without leaving the country. For example, one can travel within the continental United States from a near-tropical climate (e.g. Southern Florida) to a mid-continental climate (Minnesota). California alone offers a large coastline, snow-

capped mountains, prairies, and deserts within a single state. Lifestyles, food, and culture also tend to differ within the different regions.

Americans travelling in foreign countries are often stereotyped as loud, brash and insensitive to local cultures. Citizens of other Western countries may perceive Americans in general to be representative of a belligerent and insensitive superpower, while simultaneously and paradoxically being peaceful and thoughtful on an individual basis.

12. Popular Culture

The American state of California (especially the Hollywood region) is home to a thriving motion picture industry, with prominent film studios such as Warner Brothers, Paramount, and MGM creating dozens of multi-million dollar films every year that are enjoyed around the world. American actors are often among the world's most popular and easily identified celebrities. It's worth noting that Hollywood also tends to attract many immigrant actors and directors from around the world, many of whom, such as actor Russell Crowe or director Ang Lee become just as famous and successful as American-born stars.

The United States was a leading pioneer of television (T.V.) as an entertainment medium, and the tradition remains strong to this day. Many American television sitcoms, dramas, game shows and reality shows remain very popular both in the US and abroad. Animation is a popular US entertainment medium as well, both on the large and small screen. The characters created by Walt Disney and Warner Brothers animation studios remain very popular. In music, the United States has pioneered many distinct genres, such as country and western, jazz, rock music, hip hop, and gospel music. African American cultural influences play a particularly prominent role in many of these traditions.

American popular culture has expressed itself through nearly every medium, including movies, music, and sports. Mickey Mouse, Barbie, Elvis Presley, Madonna, Aerosmith, Babe Ruth, Baseball, American football, Basketball, screwball comedy, G.I. Joe, jazz, the blues, Rap & Hip Hop, *The Simpsons*, Michael Jackson, Superman, *Gone with the Wind*, Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jordan, Indiana Jones,

Sesame Street, *Catch-22*—these names, genres, and phrases have joined more tangible American products in spreading across the globe.

It is worth noting that while the U.S. tends to be a net exporter of culture, it absorbs many other cultural traditions with relative ease, for example: origami, soccer, anime, and yoga.

13. Technology and Gadgets

Americans, by and large, are often fascinated by new technology and new gadgets. There are many within the United States that share the attitude that through technology, many of the evils in the society can be solved. Many of the new technological innovations in the modern world were either first invented in the United States and/or first widely adopted by Americans. Examples include: the light bulb, the airplane, the transistor, nuclear power, the personal computer, and online shopping, as well as the development of the Internet. The iPod, the most popular gadget for portable digital music, is also American.

By comparison with Japan, however, only a small fraction of electronic devices make it to sale in the US, and household items such as toilets are rarely festooned with remotes and electronic buttons as they are in Asia.

14. Automobiles

Automobiles play a great role in American culture, whether it is in the mundane lives of private individuals or in the areas of arts and entertainment. The rise of suburbs and the need for workers to commute to cities brought about the popularization of automobiles. In 2001, 90% of Americans drove to work in cars. Lower energy and land costs favor the production of relatively large, powerful cars. The culture in the 1950s and 1960s often catered to the automobile with motels and drive-in restaurants. Americans tend to view obtaining a driver's license as a rite of passage. Outside of a relative few urban areas, it is considered a necessity for most Americans to own and drive cars. New York City is the only locality in the United States where more than half of all households do not own a car.

15. Drugs

The drug culture of the United States is distinguished sharply between legal, illegal and prescription drugs. The three main legal drugs are alcohol, tobacco and caffeine. The use and sale of illegal drugs such as marijuana, heroin and cocaine carries heavy penalties (see Controlled Substances Act); the U.S. expends significant resources in combating the enterprises that produce and import such commodities, in what is termed the War on Drugs. Antidepressant drugs are widely prescribed, as are stimulants such as Ritalin, a methylphenidate used to improve concentration. Today there is considerable debate over the regulation and government policy towards the control over certain substances such as marijuana; some states and counties have decriminalized the use of marijuana, although this is still illegal under federal statutes. Age limits, varying by state, regulate the sale of alcohol and tobacco. Tobacco use has declined significantly in recent decades with many "Big Tobacco" companies being at the losing end of many costly law suits. Caffeine would be the nation's most popular drug.

16. Sports

American sports are quite distinct from those played elsewhere in the world. The top three spectator team sports are baseball, American football and basketball, which are all popular on both the college and professional levels. Baseball is the oldest of these. The professional game dates from 1869 and had no close rivals in popularity until the 1960s; though baseball is no longer the most popular sport it is still referred to as the "national pastime." Also unlike the professional levels of the other popular spectator sports in the U.S., Major League Baseball teams play almost every day from April to October. American football (known simply as "football" in the U.S.) now attracts more viewers within the country than baseball; however, National Football League teams play only 16 regular-season games each year, so baseball is the runaway leader in ticket sales. Basketball, invented in Massachusetts by the Canadian-born James Naismith, is another popular sport, represented professionally by the National Basketball Association.

Most residents along the northern tier of states recognize a fourth major sport - ice hockey. Always a mainstay of Great Lakes and New England-area culture, the

sport gained tenuous footholds in regions like the Carolinas and Tampa Bay, Florida in recent years, as the National Hockey League pursued a policy of expansion. Although hockey does not have the popularity of baseball, football, and basketball, the sports achievement arguably held in highest regard by Americans is the Miracle on Ice, where the American Olympic hockey team composed of collegians defeated the powerful Soviet Union hockey team at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York.

The top tier of stock car auto racing, NASCAR, has grown from a mainly Southern sport to the second-most-watched sport in the U.S. behind football. It has largely outgrown a previously provincial image; it is now avidly followed by fans in all socioeconomic groups and NASCAR sponsorships in the premier Nextel Cup division are highly sought after by hundreds of the U.S.'s largest corporations.

Unlike in Europe, Africa, and Latin America, soccer has a relatively small following, and is mostly popular in the more international cities with large immigrant populations, like New York and Los Angeles. Generally few non-Hispanic American adults appear to be attracted to soccer as spectators, but the sport is widely played by children of affluent backgrounds (giving rise to the "soccer mom" stereotype). Dramatic growth in youth participation has fueled the national team's steady rise in caliber of play over the last two decades of the 20th century and the 2000s. Almost as many girls as boys play youth soccer in the U.S., contributing to the women's national team becoming one of the world's premier women's sides.

The extent in America to which sports are associated with secondary and tertiary education is unique among nations. In basketball and football, high school and particularly college sports are followed with a fervor equaling or exceeding that felt for professional sports; college football games can draw six-digit crowds, many prominent high school football teams have stadiums that seat tens of thousands of spectators, and the college basketball championship tournament played in March, known as March Madness, draws enormous attention. For upper-tier schools, sports are a significant source of revenue. Though student athletes may be held to significantly lower academic requirements than non-athletes at many large universities, minimum standards do exist. The U.S. is also known for endorsing many newer or less popular sports, such as golf, lacrosse, volleyball, etc.

17. Fashion

Dress norms in the United States are generally consistent with those of other post-industrial western nations and has become largely informal since the mid 20th century. Clothing in the United States also depends on a variety of factors including location, venue, and demographic factors such as ethnicity. Blue jeans are a consistent fashion trend among all classes. The western states are commonly noted for being more informal in their manner of dress than those closer to the eastern seaboard. Furthermore, individuals belonging to certain ethnic groups such as some Native American tribal members and individuals of Scottish descent may wear clothing to represent their ethnic identity at certain events. Conspicuous consumption and a desire for quality have also lead to a strong preference for designer label clothing among many in the middle and upper classes.

Fashion norms have changed greatly from decade to decade. The United States has generally followed and in some cases led trends in the history of Western fashion. It has some unique regional clothing styles, such as western wear.

Apart from professional business attire, fashion in the United States is eclectic and predominantly informal. Blue jeans were popularized as work clothes in the 1850s by merchant Levi Strauss, a German immigrant in San Francisco, and adopted by many American teenagers a century later. They are now widely worn on every continent by people of all ages and social classes. Along with mass-marketed informal wear in general, blue jeans are arguably U.S. culture's primary contribution to global fashion. The country is also home to the headquarters of many leading designer labels such as Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein. Labels such as Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle, Hollister, and Eckō cater to various niche markets.

18. Public Education

In the American educational system children are required to attend school from the age of five or six. Students typically graduate from high school at age eighteen although many states allow students to drop out at age sixteen. The public education systems vary from one state to another but generally are organized as follows:

Age 5	: Kindergarten
Ages 6-11	: Elementary school. Children start in grade 1 and advance to grade 5 or 6.
Ages 11-14 or 12-14	: Junior high school or middle school (usually grades 6 or 7 through grade 8 or 9).
Ages 14-18	: High school (usually grades 9-12 or 10-12).

A system also becoming more popular is 4-year schooling segments. Such as:

- Ages 6-9 (Grades 1-4) Elementary.
- Ages 10-13 (Grades 5-8) Middle.
- Ages 14-18 (Grades 9-12) High/secondary.

The entire span of primary and secondary education, from Kindergarten to grade 12, is often abbreviated in the US as K-12 or K12, which spoken in American English is rendered as "K through 12" or "K 12." Additionally, many children attend schools before they reach the age of five. These preschools are often private and not part of the public educational system although some public school systems include preschools.

Public education in the United States is provided by the individual states, not by the federal government (except in the limited circumstances of public schools on military bases, provided for the dependents of members of the armed services, and Federal territories, e.g. the District of Columbia). All states provide public school education from kindergarten through senior year of high school (12th grade) free of charge (except for 15 school districts in New Hampshire which do not offer kindergarten); further, the federal government does not establish a standard nationwide curriculum. Rather, the curriculum is typically established by state educational departments or local school districts, and teachers in many districts may have wide discretion to determine what is taught in the classroom.

Most states have adopted reforms based on the Outcome-based education movement. Rather than the traditional approach that all students would be expected to achieve at different levels, the focus of education would be to increase achievement, and insure through testing that all graduates must achieve one high standard, though some critics argue such a goal is not realistic. As of 2005, there is

increasing state and federal pressure to quantify teaching efficacy using results from standards-based tests (cf. No Child Left Behind), which tends to lead to a more uniform curriculum. This trend toward educational standardization, which has been attributed with a concomitant decline in flexibility in teaching, and other reforms—such as the use of whole language methodology for teaching reading in primary school, instead of the more traditional phonics-based approach—promoted in recent years have been controversial. Another controversy has arisen over the adoption of new math standards which many critics charge has largely omitted the teaching of basic arithmetic as it has been understood over history rather than merely improve understanding. Other criticisms of recent educational trends include an increasing lack of post-secondary scholarships and subsidies.

Funding of the public school systems is most often provided primarily at the local level, with money obtained from county or city property taxes used to fund the public schools (in conjunction with additional funds from the state and federal governments).

19. Private Education

Private school education in the United States at the primary and secondary levels generally receives little or no governmental support in the form of direct funding or subsidies, although non-profit bodies running private schools may receive favorable tax status. Conversely, because of the constitutional prohibition regarding governmental establishment of religion, most private religious schools are in fact barred from such direct governmental support.

Most of the private institutions have traditionally been religious institutions funded by, for example, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities. Some private secular schools, military schools, and multi-lingual schools also exist. Private secular and multi-lingual elementary and secondary education may cost \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year per student in large metropolitan areas, placing these schools out of reach of all but the wealthiest of middle- and upper-class families. However, many of these schools provide academic scholarships and need-based assistance. Religious schools vary in price, from nearly free to costs on par with private secular schools. Poorer families may send their children to these lower-priced schools for a religious

education, or because they consider the schools better than the available public schools. Homeschooling is allowed in all states (with varying degrees of regulation) and is an alternative for a small minority of households. The motivation for home schooling is often religious or political.

20. Language

The primary, although not official, language of the United States is American English. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 97% of Americans can speak English well, and for 81% it is the only language spoken at home. Nearly 30 million native speakers of Spanish also reside in the US. There are more than 300 languages besides English which can claim native speakers in the United States—some of which are spoken by the indigenous peoples (about 150 living languages) and others which were imported by immigrants. American Sign Language, used mainly by the deaf, is also native to the country. Hawaiian is also a language native to the United States, as it is indigenous nowhere else except in the state of Hawaii. Spanish is the second most common language in the United States, and is one of the official languages, and the most widely spoken, in the U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

There are four major regional dialects in the United States—northeastern, south, inland north and Midwestern. The Midwestern accent (considered the "standard accent" in the United States, and analogous in some respects to the Received Pronunciation elsewhere in the English-speaking world) extends from what were once the "Middle Colonies" across the Midwest to the Pacific states.

21. Religion

Historically, the United States' religious tradition has been dominated by Protestant Christianity. Today over three quarter of Americans identify as Christian with a slight majority identifying as Protestant (56%). Catholics (27%) are the largest Christian denomination as Protestants belong to a variety of denominations. Some parts of the population are atheist. There are also many other religions that are not as prevalent such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, among others. The

government is a secular institution, with what is often called the "separation of church and state" prevailing.

22. Housing

Immediately after World War II, Americans began living in increasing numbers in the suburbs, belts around major cities with higher density than rural areas, but much lower than urban areas. This move has been attributed to many factors such as the automobile, the availability of large tracts of land, the convenience of more and longer paved roads, the increasing violence in urban centers (see white flight), and the cheapness of housing. These new single-family houses were usually one or two stories tall, and often were part of large contracts of homes built by a single developer. The resulting low-density development has been given the pejorative label "urban sprawl." This is changing, however. "White flight" is reversing, with many Yuppies and upper-middle-class, empty nest Baby Boomers returning to urban living, usually in condominiums, such as in New York City's Lower East Side, and Chicago's South Loop. The result has been the displacement of many poorer, inner-city residents. (see gentrification). American cities with housing prices near the national median have also been losing the middle income neighborhoods, those with median income between 80% and 120% of the metropolitan area's median household income. Here, the more affluent members of the middle class, who are also often referred to as being professional or upper middle class, have left in search of larger homes in more exclusive suburbs. This trend is largely attributed to the so called "Middle class squeeze," which has caused a starker distinction between the statistical middle class and the more privileged members of the middle class. In more expensive areas such as California, however, another trend has been taking place where an influx of more affluent middle class households has displaced those in the actual middle of society and converted former middle-middle class neighborhoods into upper middle class neighborhoods.

23. Romantic Relationships

Couples often meet through religious institutions, work, school, or friends "Dating services," services that are geared to assist people in finding partners, are

popular both on and offline. The trend over the past few decades has been for more and more couples deciding to cohabit before, or instead of, getting married. The 2000 Census reported 9.7 million different-sex partners living together and about 1.3 million same-sex partners living together. These cohabitation arrangements have not been the subject of many laws regulating them, though some states now have domestic partner statutes and judge-made palimony doctrines that confer some legal support for unmarried couples.

Marriage laws are established by individual states. Same-sex marriage is currently legal only in Massachusetts. Three other states, Connecticut and Vermont, and recently New Jersey (as of December 2006, resulting from an earlier decision by the New Jersey Supreme court on October 25, 2006 in *Lewis vs. Harris*), allow same-sex couples access to state-level marriage benefits with parallel civil unions. New Hampshire has recently legislated civil unions, which will be issued beginning January 1, 2008. In many states, it is illegal to cross state lines to obtain a marriage that would be illegal in the home state. Married couples typically reside in their own dwelling.

24. Marriage Ceremonies

The typical wedding involves a couple proclaiming their commitment to one another in front of their close relatives and friends and presided over by a religious figure such as a minister, priest, or rabbi, depending upon the faith of the couple. In traditional Christian ceremonies, the bride's father will "give away" (hand off) the bride to the groom. Secular weddings are also common, often presided over by a judge, Justice of the Peace, or other municipal official.

25. Divorce

Divorce, like marriage, is the province of the state governments, not the federal government. Divorce laws vary from state to state, but no-fault divorce on the grounds of "irreconcilable differences" is now available in all states. However, in recent years many states, including North Carolina and New York requires a one-year legal and physical separation prior to a formal divorce decree. This legal requirement has led to the creation of a separate, somewhat ambiguous category of

relationships - "separated". Once a more informal term used by individuals, it has now become a legal category designating someone who is neither married nor divorced.

Married adults now divorce two-and-a-half times as often as adults did 20 years ago and four times as often as they did 50 years ago... between 40% and 60% of new marriages will eventually end in divorce. The probability within... the first five years is 20%, and the probability of its ending within the first 10 years is 33%... Perhaps 25% of children ages 16 and under live with a stepparent." -Brian K. Williams, Stacy C. Sawyer, Carl M. Wahlstrom, Marriages, Families & Intimate Relationships', 2005

Prior to the 1970s, divorcing spouses had to allege that the other spouse was guilty of a crime or sin like abandonment or adultery; when spouses simply could not get along, lawyers were forced to manufacture "uncontested" divorces. The no-fault divorce revolution began in 1969 in California; South Dakota was the last state to allow no-fault divorce, in 1985. State law provides for child support where children are involved, and sometimes for alimony. The median length for a marriage in the US today is 11 years with 90% of all divorces being settled out of court.

26. Death Rituals

By the majority of Americans, deaths are an occasion for grieving. Funerals are held to honor the "passing away" of the individual. Unlike many other cultures, even that of neighboring Mexico, death is looked upon by most Americans as a much greater sadness, and is dealt with in a much more subdued manner. Nonetheless, the majority of Americans do not express the same high degree of emotion as would be found in some other cultures, such as those of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean. Whereas some cultures may celebrate the passing of an individual with music which the deceased enjoyed or wearing colors that were favorites of the dead acquaintance, in the United States, the death of a loved one is typically seen as a time to mourn deeply, wearing all black, and making the pain and sadness that one is feeling known. However, certain segments of American culture, such as residents

of New Orleans, have historically been associated with a very different attitude toward funerals, such as that embodied in the Jazz funeral tradition.

The deceased person is typically placed in a coffin and is generally embalmed and often displayed in a chapel or funeral home for a day or two (occasionally longer) before being buried in the ground. Adherents of Hinduism and most adherents of Judaism, however, do not have their loved ones embalmed. Cremation, an increasingly common practice, involves the burning of the body to ashes, which are then stored in an urn or scattered over a site or location significant to the deceased. Unlike some countries, where the body remains in the cemetery only for a limited period of time—e.g., 20 years—in the United States there is typically no limit.

27. Gender Roles

Since the 1970s, traditional gender roles of male and female have been increasingly challenged by both legal and social means. Today, there are far fewer roles that are legally restricted by one's sex. The military remains a notable exception, where women may not be put into direct combat by law. Asymmetrical warfare, however, has put women into situations which are direct combat operations in all but name.

Most social roles are not gender-restricted by law, though there are still cultural inhibitions surrounding certain roles. More and more women have entered the workplace, and in the year 2000 made up 46.6% of the labor force, up from 18.3% in 1900. Most men, however, have not taken up the traditional full-time homemaker role; likewise, few men have taken traditionally feminine jobs such as receptionist or nurse (although nursing was traditionally a male role before the American Civil War).

28. Household Arrangements

Family arrangements in the US have become more diverse with no particular household arrangement being prevalent enough to be identified as the average.

Today, family arrangements in the United States reflect the diverse and dynamic nature of contemporary American society. Although for a relatively brief period of time in the 20th century most families adhered to the nuclear family concept (two-married adults with a biological child), single-parent families, childless couples,

and fused families now constitute the majority of families. Most Americans will marry and get divorced at least once during their life; thus, most individuals will live in a variety of family arrangements. A person may grow up in a single-parent family, go on to marry and live in childless couple arrangement, then get divorced, live as a single for a couple of years, re-marry, have children and live in a nuclear family arrangement.

"The nuclear family... is the idealized version of what most people think when they think of "family..." The old definition of what a family is... the nuclear family- no longer seems adequate to cover the wide diversity of household arrangements we see today, according to many social scientists (Edwards 1991; Stacey 1996). Thus has arisen the term postmodern family, which is meant to describe the great variability in family forms, including single-parent families and child-free couples."- Brian K. Williams, Stacey C. Sawyer, Carl M. Wahlstrom, Marriages, Families & Intimate Relationships, 2005.

Other changes to the landscape of American family arrangements include dual-income earner households and delayed independence among American youths. Whereas most families in the 1950s and 1960s relied on one income earner, most commonly the husband, the vast majority of family households now have two-income earners. Another change is the ever-increasing age at which young Americans leave their parental home. Traditionally, a person past "college age" who lived with their parent(s) was viewed negatively, but today it is not uncommon for children to live with their parents until their mid-twenties. This trend can be mostly attributed to rising living costs that far exceed those in decades past. Thus, many young adults now remain with their parents well past their mid-20s. This topic was a cover article of TIME magazine in 2005. Exceptions to the custom of leaving home in one's mid-20s can occur especially among Italian and Hispanic Americans, and in expensive urban real estate markets such as New York City, California, and Honolulu, where monthly rents commonly exceed \$1000 a month.

Year	Families (69.7%)				Non-families (31.2%)		
	Married couples (52.5%)		Single Parents	Other blood relatives	Singles (25.5%)		Other non-family
	Nuclear family	Without children			Male	Female	
2000	24.1%	28.7%	9.9%	7%	10.7%	14.8%	5.7%
1970	40.3%	30.3%	5.2%	5.5%	5.6%	11.5%	1.7%

Single-parent households are households consisting of a single adult (most often a woman) and one or more children. In the single-parent household, one parent typically raises the children with little to no help from the other. This parent is the sole "breadwinner" of the family and thus these households are particularly vulnerable economically. They have higher rates of poverty, and children of these households are more likely to have educational problems.

29. Regional Distinctions

a. Rural Living Patterns

The population of rural areas has been declining over time as more and more people migrate to cities for work and entertainment. The great exodus from the farms came in the 1940s; in recent years fewer than 2% of the population lives on farms (though others live in the countryside and commute to work). Electricity and telephone, and sometimes cable and Internet services are available to all but the most remote regions. As in the cities, children attend school up to and including high school and only help with farming during the summer months or after school.

b. Suburban Living Patterns

About half of Americans now live in what is known as the suburbs. The suburban nuclear family has been identified as part of the "American dream": a married couple with children owning a house in the suburbs. This archetype is reinforced by mass media, religious practices, and government policies and is based on traditions from Anglo-Saxon cultures.

One of the biggest differences in suburban living is the housing occupied by the families. The suburbs are filled with single-family homes separated from retail districts, industrial areas, and sometimes even public schools. However, many American suburbs are incorporating these districts on smaller scales, attracting more people to these communities.

c. Urban Living Patterns

Aside from housing, which may include more apartments and semi-attached homes than in the suburbs or small towns, the major difference from suburban living is the density and diversity of many different subcultures, as well as retail and manufacturing buildings mixed with housing. Urban residents are also more likely to travel by mass transit, and children are more likely to walk or bicycle rather than being driven by their parents.

30. Theater

Theater of the United States is based in the Western tradition, mostly borrowed from the performance styles prevalent in Europe, especially England. Today, it is heavily interlaced with American literature, film, television, and music, and it is not uncommon for a single story to appear in all forms. Regions with significant music scenes often have strong theater and comedy traditions as well. Musical theater may be the most popular form: it is certainly the most colorful, and choreographed motions pioneered on stage have found their way onto movie and television screens. Broadway in New York City is generally considered the pinnacle of commercial U.S. Theater, though this art form appears all across the country. Off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway diversify the theatre experience in New York. Another city of particular note is Chicago, which boasts the most diverse and dynamic theater scene in the country. Regional or resident theatres in the United States are professional theatre companies outside of New York City that produce their own seasons. There is also community theatre and showcase theatre (performing arts group). Even tiny rural communities sometimes awe audiences with extravagant productions.