So you’re a newcomer to the USA? As a short-term visitor, perhaps? As an exchange student? Someone who may plan to make a permanent home in the States? Regardless of circumstances, you’re probably wondering about the two hundred million people who make up the richest, most productive nation on earth. Who are these Americans? How did they get the way they are? What makes them different - if they are different? What makes them tick?

If you’re a native of Europe, Asia, Africa or Latin America, you probably already have some mixed feelings about Americans. You know that they represent less than six percent of the world’s population, but at times they seem to make sixty percent of the noise. They’re a young society, as nations go, but their impact on other countries and cultures is enormous. Not very surprisingly, the rest of the world regards them with a spectrum of emotions ranging from astonishment and admiration to exasperation and masochism. And so on.

What will strike you most forcibly in your first weeks in the USA? First – if you travel at all - the size and diversity of the land itself, more than three and a half million square miles of every kind of topography, every climate under the sun. Next, the tempo of life, pulsing with energy, very fast. Third, the degree to which that life is influenced and conditioned by technology; machines, gadgets, labor-saving devices are everywhere. Fourth, the comfort that most Americans manage to surround themselves with (some faint, disapproving voice inside you may mark this down as a form of deplorable materialism, but all the same you may miss that air-conditioning and that color television when you go home!). Finally, you’ll be surrounded - and often baffled and bemused - by the Americans themselves.

Some visitors to the USA remain permanently baffled. With despair and accuracy they point out endless paradoxes in the typical American. Friendly on the surface, but hard to know intimately. Hospitable and generous socially, but hard-driving and competitive professionally. Self-satisfied, at times, to the point of smugness but self-critical, at other times, to the point of masochism. And so on.

They find the regional diversity of Americans confusing, too. What on earth, they ask, can a Maine lobsterman have in common with a Dallas banker, a West Virginia coal miner, a Hollywood producer, a Montana sheep-herder, or a black school-teacher on a South Carolina sea-island? And they give themselves a bleak and hopeless answer: not much.

But that answer is almost certainly wrong; these people share the mysterious and powerful intangible called nationality. They are all Americans, and however faint, a common denominator is there, an almost invisible strand woven out of common history, a common heritage and underneath the surface differences a common way of looking at things.

People never really escape from their origins. So as you’re a newcomer to the USA perhaps you should focus for a moment, not on the modern American, but on his ancestor, the seventeenth-century settler who, having survived the grin Atlantic crossing, found himself with has back to the sea facing a vast and hostile wilderness that had to be tamed and conquered if he was to survive. Conquer it he and his descendants did, in a struggle so epic that its memory lingers on in countless Western movies. But the thing for the visitor to remember is this: many of the basic attitudes and characteristics formed in that struggle persist in Americans today. You may find some admirable, and others less so. The point is, they are there.

Everywhere he looked, that early American was surrounded by problems. To this day, by tradition, by training - almost by instinct - Americans are problem-solvers and solution seekers. In some parts of the world, uncomfortable or unpleasant circumstances are endured because they have always been there and people see no alternative. To an American, a problem is not something to be accepted; it is something to be attacked. Adaptability, ingenuity, raw physical energy - these made up the frontiersman’s survival kit. To these qualities his descendants have added enormous confidence in their technology and a kind of invincible optimism. No matter what the obstacles, whether they set out to conquer polio or land a man on the moon, Americans are convinced that initiative, n sooner or later.

A problem-solver is an achiever, and you will notice at once how greatly Americans respect and value achievement (they have even invented a whole industry called public relations to make sure that achievement doesn’t go unrecognized). They are happiest when accomplishment can be measured specifically. A businessman wants his charts and graphs kept rigorously up-to-date. A book tends to be judged by the number of copies it sells. In sports, Americans’ obsession with statistics often amazes non-Americans. No fuzzy theory here; no guesswork. The American wants to know exactly who is achieving what - and if he can’t measure it he’s inclined to wonder if it’s any good.
To be an achiever, one must be a do-er, and it will soon be apparent to you (especially if you’re from the Far East), that Americans are much better at doing than at merely being. In fact, you’ll notice that if they’re deprived of doing for very long, they become miserable. Some Americans grumble about their jobs, but the truth is most of them think they should work hard and most of them like to work. It is this national characteristic more than natural resources or any other factor that has made the USA so productive. In modern American life, the non-worker is regarded with a certain scorn based, perhaps, on the conviction that in pioneer days he would not have survived.

These attitudes have produced a highly kinetic society, full of movement and constant change. If you’re accustomed to a more leisurely pace, you may find the American tempo exhausting. Or you may find it exhilarating. Most Americans enjoy it; it’s a high compliment when they say of a person, "He has a lot of drive," or "He knows how to get things done." Almost invariably, the first question an American asks about a newcomer or stranger is, "What does he do?" He's interested primarily in the person's main achievement, his work or his impact on his environment, not his personal philosophy or inner life.

Restless and rootless, the frontiersman had no time to be a philosopher or a theoretician, and his descendants still take a pragmatic and straight-forward view of the world. If you’re a visitor from say, India, you may feel that Americans are much more concerned with material than with spiritual things. You’re probably right. Religion is woven into the fabric of American life but most people have little taste for metaphysics. Man is seen not so much as a passive part of the scheme of things, as a re-arranger, of that scheme. When the pioneer needed a water-wheel for a grist-mill, he built one, and his great-grandchildren still have a unique genius for inventing machines that can dominate or subdue their environment. Americans think nothing of moving mountains, if the mountains are in their way. They simply combine their own optimism and energy with unlimited mechanical horse power and push.

Until recently, it’s true, Americans have been prodigal with natural resources, because they seemed limitless, and careless about ecology, because the traditional American way was simply to move on when an area had been exploited. Now they are beginning to realize that it is better to cooperate with nature than try to overwhelm it. A European or Asiatic could have told the Americans this long ago, but he would not have listened. He learns more quickly from-his own mistakes than from the accumulated wisdom of the past.

Regardless of where you come from, it will seem to you that the American is usually in a hurry. Because of this, he is extremely time-conscious. He has a strict sense of punctuality and hates to waste time by being late or having others late for appointments. If you ask an Englishman or a Frenchman how far it is from London to Bordeaux, you'll get an answer in miles or kilometers. Ask an American how far it is from Los Angeles to Chicago and he'll probably tell you in hours with his calculation based on the fastest available mode of transport.

Partly because of this time-obsession, Americans are impatient with ceremony, which is time-consuming, and with protocol, which they view with suspicion as a dubious relic of monarchist days when there were rigid social distinctions between people. Americans are taught from the cradle that “all men are created equal,” a phrase enshrined in their Declaration of Independence. They don't really believe that this is true in terms of ability, but they accept it politically. One man, one vote, with the will of the majority prevailing and the rights of minorities safeguarded. This is the American’s political ideal, and it puzzles him greatly when it is not accepted or admired abroad.

In everyday life, in a kind of tacit acknowledgement of this official egalitarianism, Americans tend to be informal, in most parts of the country breezily so. Visitors from abroad are often astonished to hear secretaries in American offices call their employers by their first names. The American is also gregarious; he likes to join clubs or other organizations where the backgrounds and thought-patterns of other members do not differ too much from his own. He is likely to have his friendships compartmentalized; those he works with, those he plays golf or bridge with, those he sees only at social gatherings. He enjoys the companionship of such friends, but he doesn't offer - or expect to receive - deep intimacy or total commitment. The rapid pace and enormous mobility of American society make lifelong friendships difficult, although in small towns and settled communities they do exist.

Some visitors to the USA say that the thing they miss most is the emotional support that comes from close, sharing friendships. When a Spaniard or a Greek or a Brazilian has some acute personal problem, he turns to his best friend. An American is more likely to turn to a psychologist, a psychiatrist or a marriage counselor. Americans have great faith in "the expert," a reflection of their conviction that specialized training and knowledge make problem-solving quicker and produce better solutions.
Most old societies are firmly rooted in tradition. You will find that, while they often have a sentimental attachment to the past, Americans are not true traditionalists. To the forward-looking American, established ways are not necessarily best. Unless your visit takes you to older parts of the country - New England or the Deep South - you'll probably find that people regard adaptability as more important than conformity with ancestral ways and customs.

In many countries, persons tend to think of themselves primarily as a member of a group, or community, or sect or clan. The American sees himself as an individual, and this individualism makes him wary of authority in any form. He will accept military discipline in wartime, but only reluctantly. He believes in maintaining law and order, but he also believes that he is the best judge of what is good for him. In recent years he has been forced to the conclusion that only centralized government can deal with certain massive social problems. But his basic concept of government remains unshaken: that the State exists to serve him, not the other way around.

If your values have been formed in Asia, or Latin America or some parts of Europe, you may be troubled by the structure of the American family. Compared to what you are used to, it may seem weak, limited as a rule to a nucleus of parents-with-small children, lacking strong vertical ties between generations and strong lateral ties to cousins and other kinsmen. For better or worse, American children are encouraged to become self-reliant early and as soon as their education is finished to strike out on their own. This same attitude of independence often impels elderly or retired people to live by themselves; their children do not automatically take over their care and maintenance.

As a result, you will observe, communication between generations in the USA is sometimes limited, and sharp differences of opinion may arise. For example, in recent years the pioneer virtues of initiative, competitiveness and hard, unrelenting work have been challenged by members of the younger generation who feel that these traits, uncontrolled, may lead to a dehumanized, desensitized society.

On the surface, such clashes of opinion may seem divergent or abrasive, but in the long run they may also be healthy. Undoubtedly there are many American businessmen or workers who need to expand their cultural horizons, deepen their appreciation of the arts, improve their relationships with people, concern themselves more with their families and less with their bank accounts. It does no harm to have this pointed out. Conversely, it does no harm to point out that the son who scorns his father's obsession with work or business often is attending college and pursuing his iconoclasm at his father's expense. The dialogue can - and frequently does - become rather strident, but it is a typically American way of doing things.

One thing that may trouble you more than you care to admit is the American crime rate and what seems to be a sinister American susceptibility to lawlessness and violence. The absence of strong gun control laws in the United States may strike you as a form of barbarism - if not madness.

The American's resistance to gun control is rooted in his pioneer heritage. Two hundred years ago - even a hundred in some places - owning a gun and knowing how to use it was often the key to survival. In addition, the gun was considered a form of insurance against tyranny; the right of the people to keep and bear arms is written into the Constitution. Rightly or wrongly, many Americans regard any serious attempt to control firearms as the first step in the establishment of a repressive government. They see nothing wrong with guns "in the right hands." The trouble is that wrong hands so often use them.

As for the crime statistics you'll find that Americans deplore them heartily and are searching urgently for solutions. But causes run deep: poverty in the midst of affluence, the role of the media in emphasizing this (even in slums, the omnipresent television holds out glittering images of the good life being enjoyed by others), the traditional American resistance to authority, and so on. In a highly technological society, if an individual's chances of advancement are blocked by poor education, racial discrimination, or lack of opportunity the way of violence may seem better than no way at all. The ultimate solution probably lies more in improved life-conditions for the underprivileged than in better law enforcement. But even in America progress toward this Utopia is slow.

If crime is a dark side of the picture, you'll find a bright side in the typical American's astonishing capacity for volunteer action. Raising funds for a hospital, supporting a museum or symphony orchestra, organizing programs for foreign students, banding together for countless causes, Americans don't seem to care what the goal is so long as it offers them a sense of involvement, achievement and the hope of improving their surroundings.

This extraordinary willingness to cooperate without tangible reward goes back to pioneer days when barn raisings and cabin-roofings were accomplished, often in a single day, by the combined efforts of friends or neighbors. The secret ingredient may well be the average American's capacity to set aside personal differences - of religion, or opinion or political beliefs - in the interests of getting a job done. Whatever the origin, this deep-rooted American trait offers the foreign visitor a splendid opportunity to make friends easily and join in the life of the community. All you have to do is offer your services to the volunteer group of your choice. You'll be taken right in. And put to work!
More often than not, these volunteer organizations are spear-headed and staffed by women. How will you find these women? Remarkably versatile, energetic and self-assured. The typical American wife and mother combines an extraordinary number of skills and roles both in and out of the home. In the home she is cook, laundress, fixer of gadgets, chauffeur, budget-keeper, diagnostician, first-aid expert, child-psychologist, skilled hostess and endlessly on and on. Outside the home she may well be a lawyer, a bank president, a sportswoman, a civic worker, a power in the local church or in local politics.

Such a woman usually considers herself the intellectual equal of her husband or any other man. If you come from a country where women traditionally play a secondary role, you may feel (and be too polite to say) that the American woman has too much independence. The object of this opinion would laugh at such a notion, point out areas where she feels that even American women are still discriminated against, and assure you that she will settle for nothing less than complete equality.

Many areas of life in America - of life anywhere, for that matter - are extremely complex. For example, visitors from overseas, especially those from Africa, often wonder in advance about race relations. No one can deny that in the USA racial prejudice still exists among all ethnic groups. But overt forms of it have diminished dramatically in the last two decades. The best way to form a balanced judgment is to talk to as many Americans as possible, Americans of all shades of color and opinion, and then reach your own conclusion. One thing to keep in mind is this: the USA is a young country, full of evolutionary ideas and unbelievably swift social changes. If you don’t like the way things are, wait a minute!

All generalizations, a wise man once said, are false. Then he added, "including this one." The foregoing is just a sketch - a far from infallible sketch - of the energetic, pragmatic, optimistic, restless, generous, hospitable, self-satisfied - but also self-critical bundle of contradictions known as the 20th-century American. If he is different from people elsewhere, it is because his history and his environment have made him different. If he has his faults - and he does - he also has his virtues, not the least of which is that he is seldom dull. Taken all in all, he adds color and zest and excitement to the endless drama of life on the third planet from the sun.

*This article is reprinted from "How To Understand Those Mystifying Americans," Arthur Gordon, Friendship Ambassadors, Inc.

Arthur Gordon, a distinguished writer and editor for many of America's leading publications, spent several months criss-crossing the United States talking with educators, students and world travelers to research and develop the material contained in this report.