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An Advanced Reader

Ethel & Martin Tiersky

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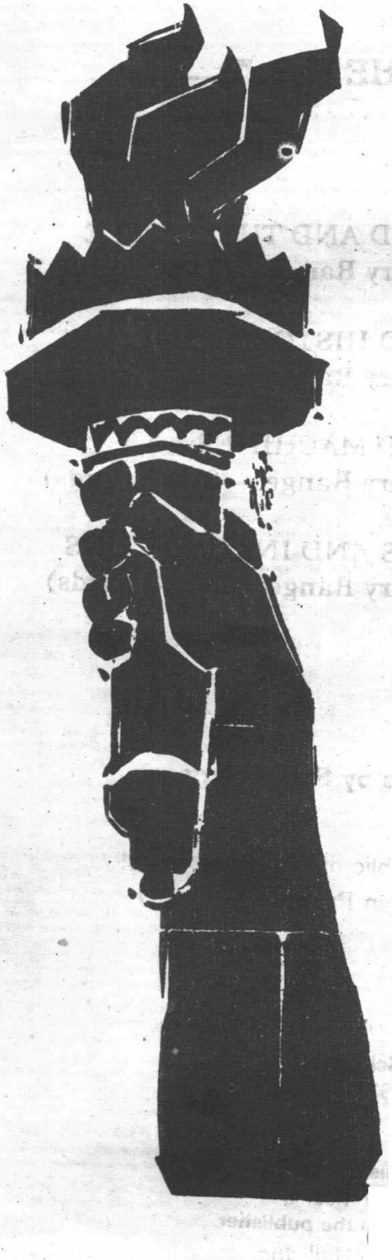

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A Survey of American Culture and Traditions

An Advanced Reader

Ethel & Martin Tiersky

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Preface

Customs and Institutions is the fourth and final volume in a series of graded readers about the United States. In all four volumes, vocabulary and sentence structure are kept simple so that students of English can understand the texts more easily.

Book I, *The Land and the People,* deals with the geography of the United States and discusses the nation's territorial growth from colonial times to the present.

Book II, *Men and History,* tells the stories of twenty-three famous Americans, relating a major accomplishment or well-known historical event associated with each.

Book III, *Men and Machines,* deals with important inventors and scientists, primarily those who helped to develop American industry.

Book IV, *Customs and Institutions,* discusses many different aspects of American culture, emphasizing how various immigrant groups have helped to enrich American life.

As its title promises, *Customs and Institutions* deals primarily with customs in the U.S.A.—how Americans celebrate their holidays, what they like to eat, which forms of entertainment they prefer, what sports they enjoy playing and watching. It also deals with American institutions: social, religious, educational, and political.

In addition to describing contemporary life in the United States, *Customs and Institutions* also attempts to analyze it. Concerning some aspects of American behavior, the book deals with that penetrating question: *Why*? Why is the divorce rate so high? Why do so many American mothers work? Why is there a racial problem in the U.S.A.? Why do so many adults attend school? Why is the American worker so prosperous? These are questions that every student of American society ponders, so we have tried to answer them.

Finally, we wished to tell our readers not only about how Americans behave but also about what they believe. American philosophies of education and government; American attitudes toward religion, marriage, and family life; the American outlook on life in general; and the American Dream—all are given as much attention as this thin volume will allow.

In creating a mythical "typical American" to pin our generalizations upon, we do not mean to imply that all Americans behave the same way and share the same ideals. However, American attitudes have, to some extent, been shaped by the national heritage. The more one knows about the American experience, the better one understands the people who have experienced it. In hopes of helping readers to understand Americans better, we have somewhat fearfully ventured into the realm of the abstract.

A word about what this book is *not*. It is neither a defense of American culture nor an attack upon it. Though the text does reveal obvious strengths and weaknesses, its primary intent is to describe and analyze rather than evaluate.

Obviously, so small a book cannot be more than an *introduction* to the living patterns and attitudes which are characteristic of Americans. Deep insight into the American culture requires much more extensive reading, observation, and, most important, participation in American society.

Lincolnwood, Illinois Ethel and Martin Tiersky

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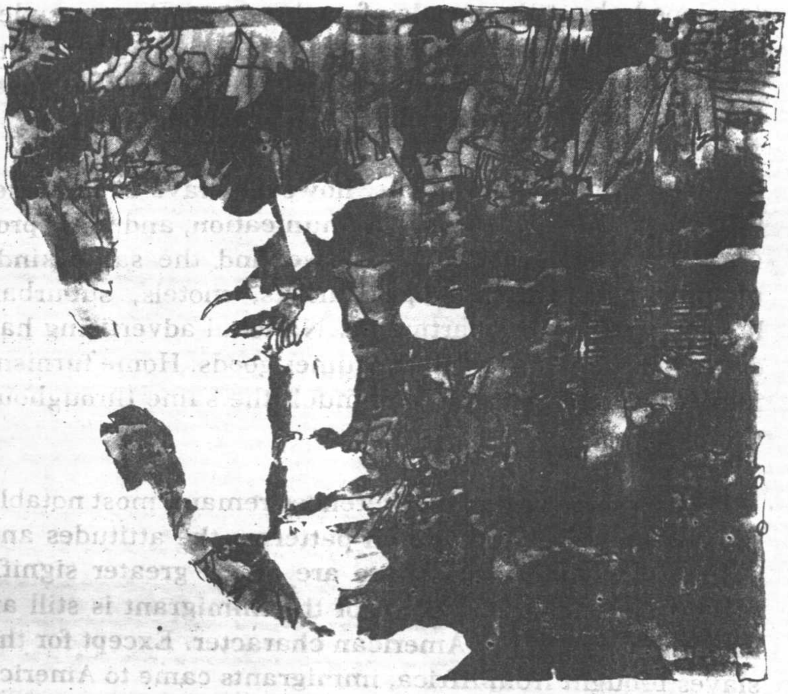

I
The American Character

What is an American? What are his attitudes and values? Is there a typical American personality or outlook? Dare one generalize about 212 million people living in an area of 3,615,123 square miles?

The United States is a huge nation, the fourth largest in the world. Within its borders, there are vast regional differences in climate, geography, and historical experience. Each section of the United States is often thought to have its own customs and attitudes, and stereotypes have

developed about the people of each region. For example, the New Englander is described as stern and self-reliant, the Southerner as gracious and leisurely, and the Westerner as casual and friendly.

Most regional distinctions, however, have been erased by modern transportation, communication, and mass production. From coast to coast, we find the same kinds of shopping centers, supermarkets, motels, suburban houses, and urban apartments. National advertising has created national tastes in consumer goods. Home furnishings, cars, and clothing look much the same throughout the nation.

Though some regional differences remain, most notably in cooking styles and speech patterns, the attitudes and values that Americans share are of far greater significance. The pioneering spirit of the immigrant is still an important part of the American character. Except for the slaves brought from Africa, immigrants came to America voluntarily, eagerly, in search of greater prosperity and freedom.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the pioneering spirit led American settlers to travel westward by the thousands in search of land and gold. This westward movement has never ceased. Today, Northerners and Midwesterners are attracted to the West because of good business opportunities and a mild climate. From 1950 to 1970, Los Angeles (the nation's third largest city) grew 43 percent in population, while Tucson and Phoenix (Arizona's two major cities) grew more than 400 percent!

The desire to start a new life in a new place is noticeable throughout the nation. About 40 million Americans change residences every year. The average American moves fourteen times in his lifetime, compared to five moves for the average Japanese. Because so many people move so often, even those who stay put have a steady supply of new neighbors. In the United States, one cannot go home to find one's past. The old neighborhood revisited usually looks completely different, with high-rise buildings on the old softball sandlots. Childhood friends have long since moved away.

Much of this residential shifting is local and primarily related to the need for bigger or smaller living quarters as family size changes. Some local moving is also related to neighborhood changes. When families move into higher income brackets, they often move into nicer residential areas, leaving the older, deteriorating neighborhood to poorer people. Long distance moves are often related to job opportunities. Some workers move from a city where there is little chance of employment to another city where industry is expanding. Some workers, employed by large corporations, move from one city to another because job promotion within the company requires such changes. In addition, about half of the nation's young single adults live away from their home towns because they are attending college, serving in the armed forces, or just seeking new and independent lives.

What does all this moving about do to attitudes and values? Vance Packard, one of the nation's well-known nonfiction writers, discusses the problem in his popular book *A Nation of Strangers*. He believes that the highly mobile American society leaves individuals with feelings of rootlessness, isolation, indifference to community welfare, and shallow personal relationships. He urges that efforts be made to stabilize our shifting population so that Americans can "rediscover the natural human community."

Americans who do not change residence are also on the move—traveling by air or auto to see their own country and to visit others. The need to explore a new frontier is basic to the American character. Now that most of the nation's wilderness is settled, the frontier of outer space has become the latest challenge.

The courage to try something new has been an American characteristic since colonial times, when the nation's founding fathers started one of the greatest experiments of all times—the creation of American democracy. The citizens of the United States, through their elected representatives, establish the nation's laws and determine its foreign policy. Those who disapprove of the laws and policies established by their representatives may openly express their disapproval and try to elect new representatives to carry out their wishes.

American democracy means majority rule, but it also means protection of minority rights. There are certain freedoms which the United States promises to all its citizens, and members of minority groups cannot be denied these rights by a vote of the majority. The basic rights of every citizen, outlined in the first ten amendments to the Constitution, are known as the Bill of Rights. These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom from unreasonable search and arrest.

In the United States, democracy is not only a form of government; it is a way of life. The belief that those who must live by the rules should help make the rules is basic to nearly all American institutions and organizations. American children are introduced to the democratic concepts of majority rule and representative government at a very early age. Many families hold weekly meetings to determine household rules and activities. Most schools have a student council with elected representatives so that students can voice their opinions about school regulations and activities. Social, civic, labor, and charitable groups elect their officers and vote on issues. In business, stockholders elect the directors they feel are best qualified to control the company. Local and state governments are also based upon democratic principles.

"All men are created equal," says the Declaration of Independence. This statement does not mean that all human beings are equal in ability or ambition. It means, instead, that all people should be treated equally before the law and given equal privileges and opportunities, insofar as government can control these. In practice, this ideal often does not work perfectly. There have always been those who would deny the rights of others for their own self-interest. There are times when the American people need to be reminded that *any* denial of basic rights is a weakening of the total system. However, equal treatment and equal opportunity for all are ideals toward which American society is moving ever closer.

The American belief in equality of opportunity is illustrated by the Horatio Alger myth. Horatio Alger was a nineteenth-century American novelist who wrote stories about poor boys who became successful. His books told about the little newsboy or bootblack who, because he was hardworking, honest, and lucky, grew up to become rich and respected. These popular "rags-to-riches" stories exemplified the American Dream—the belief that any individual, no matter how poor, can achieve wealth and fame through diligence and virtue.

For many immigrant Americans, this dream became reality. Most of them, particularly those who came to the United States during the nineteenth century, were peasants and laborers in their native lands. Within a generation or two, nearly all these immigrant families rose on the social and economic scales. Financial success was often the result of taking a risk, of quitting a salaried position and starting a new business. Becoming an entrepreneur is still an open, though sometimes rugged, pathway to prosperity.

Social mobility—movement from class to class—has always been characteristic of the United States. However, although sociologists talk of the country's class structure, most Americans do not think in these terms. They do not see themselves as struggling to move from the lower middle class to the upper middle class. Instead they think in terms of higher income to pay for a bigger house, a trip to Europe, summer camp for their children, or more retirement insurance.

Prior to the mid-1960s, American initiative to experiment was encouraged by a generally optimistic outlook. The typical American believed in trying something new in an attempt to make life better. He had a firm faith in the possibility, even the probability, of progress. This attitude was based upon his own and his family's past experiences. Older people often told their children about how hard life had been before the invention of countless work-saving devices and ready-made products. Parents could remember the days when orange juice had to be squeezed from oranges by hand rather than poured from a can and diluted. Grandpa could recall mowing the lawn with a manual mower. Grandma described the old-fashioned washer and feeding the clothes into the wringer, piece by piece. Great-grandma showed the blisters on her hands from churning butter and cranking the ice-cream maker. Great-grandpa talked about walking five miles to school before the days of public transportation and car pools.

Because life was getting easier, people assumed that it was getting better. The prevailing American attitude was one invented by a French pharmacist who, in treating his patients by hypnosis, instructed them to say, "Every day in every way I am getting better and better." Until the mid-1960s, the typical American had this kind of faith in automatic improvement. But by the end of the decade, this national optimism, which set the United States apart from all other nations, was gone.

Before the mid-1960s, Americans shared another happy attitude—a naive patriotism that said the United States was the best of all possible places; that American policy was determined by ethics, not expediency; that we had never fought an unjust war; that we were always on the side of right and ruled by noble motives.

Then came the 1960s, a period when Americans realized that if conditions could change for the better, they could also change for the worse. Even more frightening, people began to notice that the quality of life in the United States was already changing for the worse, and that if serious and immediate efforts were not made to stop the trend, life would soon be unlivable in this best of all possible places. Americans also realized that their government, big business, and other major institutions were not always ethical and could not always be trusted to do what would be best for the nation and the world.

What killed American optimism? First and perhaps most important, there was the Viet Nam War. During the 1960s, American involvement kept growing, and the bloodshed entered the American living room via TV. The horrors of our twelve years there—46,000 American dead and many more Vietnamese—formed only one part of the violence which characterized the decade. Several assassinations of public figures and a continued rise in the violent crime rate led to a great demand for gun control legislation. There were race riots in many cities, student riots on many campuses, policemen with tear gas and guns to quiet the rioters, and TV cameramen to bring it all home to the American public.

Public protests (both violent and nonviolent) left their mark upon the American character. Noisy demonstrations occurred as various groups pointed out that they had always been discriminated against in this country. Women, blacks, Indians, and Spanish-speaking citizens all gave their versions of American history and destroyed any remaining illusions that this nation has offered freedom, justice, and equality to all. White Americans began to feel guilty about their aggressive destruction of non-white cultures. American men were warned that the exploited, subservient American housewife was a dying breed. Women's Liberation groups deplored the "packaged" woman whose major interest was in maintaining an attractive facade in order to win and hold a husband. This type of woman was depicted as a victim of and a traitor to her sex.

In the 1960s still another exploited American made himself heard—the consumer. Choosing daily from a vast array of goods, the American shopper often found that the products he brought home were not what he assumed they were, not what they claimed to be, and sometimes not even safe to use. The idea of consumer protection received a big boost in 1962 when President Kennedy delivered a special message listing four basic consumer rights: the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard. Then, in 1965, a young lawyer named Ralph Nader published a shocking book telling the American public that their automobiles were unnecessarily dangerous. As a result of his efforts, the huge automobile industry was forced to produce a safer product. Seat belts became standard equipment, designs were changed to reduce injuries from collisions, and automobiles with faulty mechanisms were recalled for repair.

Nader came upon the scene at a time when big business was giving the public a great many shoddy goods and services. His success in dealing with the auto industry inspired others to campaign for better products. Today more than a thousand consumer programs are operated by the federal government. The majority of state governments have consumer fraud units, and more than fifty cities have agencies to protect the consumer. Legislation has done much toward accomplishing the concerned consumer's two major goals—product safety and truth in advertising. Labeling on packaged foods is more explicit than ever before. Manufacturers of dangerous articles (such as cigarettes and toxic substances) must label the products with appropriate warnings. In 1973, the labeling of ingredients in cosmetic products became mandatory.

Today the American shopper is better protected against fraud and danger than ever before. In addition, people are learning to purchase more intelligently and economically. All across the country, consumer cooperatives are developing, enabling members to buy goods at wholesale prices. Also, schools, unions, supermarket chains, and many other organizations are helping to educate buyers so that they will get the most and the best for their money.

Of all the protest groups competing for public attention during the 1960s, the most alarming were those that spoke out against pollution. Americans learned that their air, water, land, and food were being polluted in a variety of ways. This pollution was reaching a dangerous level which could in the near future become a threat to human, plant, and animal life. Air pollution was coming primarily from automobile exhaust fumes and industrial smokestacks. Water pollution was due to industrial waste, garbage, detergents, and other sources. The land and its animal and plant life were being polluted by a variety of man-made chemicals, especially insecticides and herb-