INFORMALITY

Their notions of equality lead Americans to be quite informal in their general behavior and in their relationships with other people. Store clerks and restaurant servers, for example, may introduce themselves by their first (given) names and treat customers in a casual, friendly manner. American clerks, like other Americans, have been trained to believe that they are as valuable as anyone else, even if they happen to be engaged at a given time in an occupation that others might consider lowly. This informal behavior can outrage visitors from abroad who hold high status in countries where people do not assume that "all men are created equal." Meanwhile, that American clerk is likely to feel offended by a customer who treats her "disrespectfully," speaking to her brusquely or seeming to order her about.

Relationships among students, teachers, and coworkers in American society are often quite informal, as the following example illustrates. Liz, a staff member at a university international office, invited a group of French exchange students along with their American teachers and several coworkers to her home for dinner. When the guests arrived, she welcomed them by saying, "Make yourselves at home." She showed them where to find the food and drinks in the kitchen and introduced them to some of the other guests. The French students then served themselves and sat with the other guests in small groups throughout the house, eating and talking. The young son of one of the American guests entertained them with jokes. When it was time to leave, several of the American guests stayed to help Liz clean up.

Later, in describing the dinner party, the French students remarked that such an event would almost never happen in their country. First, they were surprised that Liz, whom they had met only twice before, had invited them into her home. Moreover, they were impressed that the teachers and students and the international office coworkers and their family members socialized so easily. Even though they held positions of different status at work and were of different ages, they seemed to interact effortlessly.

People from societies where general behavior is more formal than it is in the United States are struck by Americans' informal speech, dress, and body language. Americans use idiomatic speech and slang on most occasions, reserving formal speech for public events and fairly formal situations. Even while giving a formal speech or presentation they may move

about—behavior that, in some cultures, is seen as disrespectful toward the audience. U.S. Americans of almost any station in life can be seen in public wearing jeans, sandals, or other informal clothing. People slouch in chairs or lean on walls or furniture when they talk, rather than maintaining an erect posture.

A brochure advertising a highly regarded liberal arts college contained a photograph of the college president, dressed in shorts and an old T-shirt, jogging past one of the classroom buildings on his campus. Americans are likely to find the photograph appealing: "Here is a college president who's just like anyone else. He doesn't think he's too good for us."

Similarly, U.S. President George W. Bush frequently allowed himself to be photographed in his jogging clothes while out for one of his frequent runs or in work clothes while clearing weeds at his Texas ranch. President Barack Obama was often photographed playing basketball, wearing shorts and a T-shirt.

The superficial friendliness for which Americans are so well known is related to their informal, egalitarian approach to other people. "Hi!" they will say to just about anyone, or "Howya doin?" (that is, "How are you doing?" or "How are you?"). This behavior reflects not so much a special interest in the person addressed as a concern (not conscious) for showing that one is a "regular guy," part of a group of normal, pleasant people—like the jogging college president and the jogging president of his superpower country.

More ideas about American notions of friendship appear in Part II.

THE FUTURE, CHANGE, AND PROGRESS

Americans are generally less concerned about history and traditions than are people from older societies. "History doesn't matter," many of them will say, or "It's the future that counts." They look ahead. They have the idea that what happens in the future is within their control, or at least subject to their influence. The mature, sensible person, they think, sets goals for the future, writes them down, and works systematically toward them. When asked about their goals, as they commonly are in job interviews ("Where do you want to be in ten years?"), most Americans have a ready reply. If