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Module: Civilisation

Level: First year students (S2)

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Lecture One: American Character

1- AMERICAS (vs) the United States of America: Geographical Location



By the **Americas**, we refer to North America and South America. However, the United States of America (USA or **America**) is a country that is situated in North America. It is bordered by Canada from the North, Mexico from the South, The Pacific Ocean from the East and the Pacific Ocean from the West. It is the world's third largest country in size (after Russia, and Canada). It is composed of 50 states and Washington DC is its capital.

The USA is divided into six main regions: New England, the mid-Atlantic, the South, the Midwest, the Southwest, and the West. The history of America started with the coming of the Native Indians to it. The arrival of Christopher Columbus to its coasts encouraged the European influx to this newly discovered land. After that, many immigrants from all over the world travelled to the new world because of different reasons (economic hardships, religious persecution, and political oppression). This transferred the USA from the new world to a nation of immigrants. However, this phenomenon raised many questions about the American character: how Americans look like? What do Americans like? In America is there just one typical American character or many?

2- Diversity (vs) Oneness

One American character

The American character is a very controversial topic. Many historians have seen that since America is a nation of immigrants, we cannot generalize about a one typical American character. However, others have seen that in America we have one typical character.

Mortimer Zuckerman (editor in chief in the *US News and World Report*) argued that generalization about a one typical American character is valid talking about a one American culture of **self-reliance** (being autonomous, independent, free), **independence** (free, self-sufficient, self-standing, self-made), **resourcefulness** (active, bright, capable, able, adventurous), **pragmatism** (efficient, logical, real), and **novelty** (original, new, fresh). It means that Zuckerman associated these characteristics with all Americans regardless of their ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic background.

Diversity

However, other scholars have associated the American character with the word: Diversity. Diversity in America is located in different aspects of the country:

a- Geography

America is a vast country covering an area of **3.700.000** square miles. Within this large area we find tall mountains, large forests, rolling hills, runny rivers and rugged coastlines. This made the American geography seem so diverse.

b- Climate

Because of the diversity of the American geography, there are great climate variations from the south to the north from east to west of America. Moving from one state to another in America make you feel as if you are moving from one country to another. In northern Alaska temperature in December may drop to **(-75)** Fahrenheit while in South Florida you can have a sunbath in the same month.

c- Population

America is the third largest nation in population (after India and China) with about 275 million (329.5 million in 2020). America also is called the nation of immigrants since the majority of its inhabitants were immigrants. Racially, America is composed of 82% white, 13% blacks and 4% pacific islanders and 1% Native Americans. In America, Hispanics make the second largest ethnic minority in America (they are about 12% of the entire population). This made American population have great differences including various skin colors, different religious beliefs, and countless languages and ethnicities. Indeed, all

these differences inside the American society made a center of great problems of racism and prejudice.

About the future of the American population, demographers predict some change in the American society. The US Census Bureau estimates that by 2050 three population trends may appear in America. First, logically there would be a growth in population leading to sometimes better understanding between communities and in other situations to the increase of racism in America. Second, the increase in population will lead to the graying of the American society encouraging Americans in the future to undervalue the elders and worship the youth population. Third, according to demographers, this increase in population will lead to the growth of ethnic groups and this will automatically make changes in attitudes, beliefs, and characters.

Moving from one state to another in America can make you feel as if you are travelling from one country to another because of the regional variations in the country. Noticeably, every state has its own cooking styles, recreation activities, and even attitudes that change because of the change of weather, geographical location, and ethnicity. For example, New Yorkers are said to be sophisticated if compared with Californians, New Englanders are said to be more conservative than others. However, generalizations are not valid in all cases since there may be some exceptions.

However, there are some ways that were said to decrease differences between various ethnic groups in America. Modern communication, mass production national advertising reduced differences in America and unified the American taste. Television, movies, schools, clothing brands helped in creating a national American taste.

3- American Democracy

In any democratic country, decisions are made by the majority via voting (majority **rule** principle) . in America, voting is not just a way of choosing representatives and political leaders, but it is a culture. It is used to make decisions in the social world, business world, schools, and even homes. Children vote in their schools, family members divide household activities via voting, and employees vote their employees at work.

Another important principle in America is equality. In the Declaration of Independence, **all Americans are equal** before the law and given equal privilege and opportunities. (Jobs, education, healthcare ...).

The American Dream is the other American legacy that proves the principle of equality. It guaranties success to any American who is honest and a hard worker (it means in America you can achieve success through honesty and hard work). As a result, **social mobility** in America is very common making the movement from one social class to another valid.

More, **Social movements** in America are very active improving the social life of Americans. One influential social movement in America is called the **Grassroots Movement**. It is a social movement that can influence decision making process not only in domestic affairs (education, health services, rights of minorities...) but also in foreign affairs (the international relations of America). This was clear when this movement opposed the American Vietnamese war of 1960s.

4- Typical American Characters

There are many attitudes and characters that are typically American. Regardless to the origins of every American, there are some values that are characteristically but not exclusively American. The typical American is said to have a **pioneering spirit** to try things for the first time so that to be the first in doing that thing. Americans like to try everything new in changing jobs, in moving from one state to another so that they experience the new since they think that the new may be better. Indeed, this was greatly reflected in the **westward movement** when the majority of Americans decided to go west to discover the western parts of America in search of free lands and gold.

Because Americans love newness, they embraced science and technological advancement. Americans learn how to be familiar with computer, robots, machines so that they benefit from their services and save time and energy while using them. However, there are some problems that emerged from the love of Americans to science and technology. The basic problem is pollution (air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution...) that have detrimental effects on people and on nature.

Another typical American character is **time**. In America, time is sacred, and every minute is worth saving. Almost every American wears a watch and clocks are everywhere. This reflects how Americans appreciate time and people who respect it. Late, unpunctual people are seen as irresponsible and careless. The American spirit of saving time made them buy all machines, all technologies so that they save time.

Americans, also love **money** and appreciate possessions and wealth. This is the reason behind their hard work and respect of time. American society is a materialistic, consumer society. Their work is done perfectly so that they can have a better life, a fancier car, and may be a bigger house.

Americans are said to be **honest** since they say what they mean, and they mean what they say. They are so direct in expressing views and honesty without complex. Sometimes this American honesty may make foreigners think that Americans are rude and mean. However, Americans see that assertiveness as a necessity especially in the business world.

Another typical American attitude is **competitiveness**. Americans are so competitive, and they see winning as an obligation and not an optional choice. This spirit may push Americans to use even illegal and immoral ways to achieve their goals.

Pragmatism is also an American attitude that makes Americans admire all that is practical, fast, and new. Therefore, Americans fail to appreciate all that is traditional and ancient.

To conclude, as mentioned before these attitudes are characteristically but not exclusively American since we cannot generalize about all Americans. Still exceptions are valid. Generally, Americans are so nice and respectful. They respect all races, all religions, and all skin colors since it is a nation of immigrants where a foreigner is never an outsider.