

# THAT'S AMERICA

Foreword by M. François BUJON DE L'ESTANG,  
former French Ambassador to the United States.

*Everybody believes that he knows the United States. Such is the power of American popular culture that, even without having ever set foot on American soil, everyone in France (and in Europe) feels an uncanny familiarity with the U.S. Thanks to Hollywood, we have all been singing in the rain with Gene Kelly, riding through Monument Valley alongside John Wayne, teaming up with Elliott Ness and the Untouchables to defeat Al Capone in Prohibition times. Thanks to literature, we have all suffered during the Great Depression with John Steinbeck, during the Civil War with Stephen Crane or Margaret Mitchell; followed the banks of the Mississippi River with Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, explored the American Dream and its disillusion with John Dos Passas. Many among our fellow citizens feel like they attended Woodstock, or participated in the California Gold Rush with the Forty-Niners, or fought at Midway and Iwo Jima with Buck Danny. They know all about Broadway, have discovered New Orleans with Louis Armstrong, New York's 52nd street through Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, Chicago's South Side through Buddy Guy. Talk about soft power!*

*Yet this feeling of familiarity is superficial, and deceptive. America's geography is immense and diverse, its history far richer and more complex than what foreigners generally believe, and its great myths and legends have powered American society, as much as they reveal some of its flaws and internal contradictions. America is actually a one-of-a-kind phenomenon: it is a great country and a great people, but it is also a philosophy and an attitude, and for many who came to its shores fleeing poverty, hardship, or religious or political persecution, it is a hope or a dream come true. America is indeed completely idiosyncratic. Its DNA is radically different from ours. In many ways, it looks like another planet. And moreover, as Hispanics and Asians have now overtaken Europeans in contemporary immigration trends, they tend to drive America farther from Europe, so that the respective worlds in which we live remain closely related, but are becoming increasingly different.*

*Our two Republics are sisters. They are both daughters of the Age of Enlightenment. They feel an extraordinary affinity for each other, have been allied for two centuries and never been at war with one another. They may have been somewhat estranged throughout the XIXth century, but have consistently joined forces and interacted intimately through the XXth. Yet, they are extremely different, and regularly experience difficulties understanding one another.*

*Because of their own history, traditions and collective psychology, the French find it hard to understand, for instance, the importance of federalism in American political life and electoral rules, and in general, the institutions and constitutional system of the United States. Even if the Founding Fathers took their inspiration from Montesquieu, the separation of powers is far more rigorous in the United States than in France, the U.S. Supreme Court has no equivalent in our system, and the game of checks and balances as practiced in Washington is alien to us. The workings of Congress are fairly arcane and difficult to follow for the French, who wrongly believe that the President of the United States is omnipotent. We also tend to consider the Common Law and the U.S. legal system as exotic, and are constantly shocked by the role played by money in American politics.*

*Similarly, we have to recognize that U.S. society is very different from ours. American traditional values are far apart from French ones – the respect that Americans entertain for entrepreneurship, money and success, the way the spirit of business shapes American life, the absolute belief that nothing is impossible and, generally, American positivism and optimism astonish the French, who are deeply attached to the central role played by the State, as well as to their social safety net, and criticize American society for being unduly hard on the weak. The French, who have built up their notion of "laïcité" (unintelligible to Americans) into a dogma also cannot understand the role played by religion in public life in the U.S. And we are sometimes slow or clumsy in importing important societal recipes like Affirmative Action from across the Atlantic, that may actually be relevant to our own social problems.*

*American civilization indeed needs to be analyzed and explained in simple terms if we want to understand it better. And a better understanding of American ways can only help us in trying to fix or reshape what doesn't work in our own system. Jean-Eric Branaa's book builds a very useful bridge across the Atlantic and between our two cultures, and plugs a gaping hole in France's knowledge and comprehension of America's institutions, politics and society.*

François Bujon de l'Estang  
Ambassadeur de France  
Former ambassador to the United States, 1995-2002



ANADA



- ◆ Federal capital
- ▲ State capital
- Major cities

# What is America?

part 1

A HYPERPOWER WITHOUT INFLUENCE?

Documents - The U.S. in 3 Maps

part 2

GEOGRAPHY

Documents - Physical Regions

part 3

POPULATION

Documents - The Family

part 4

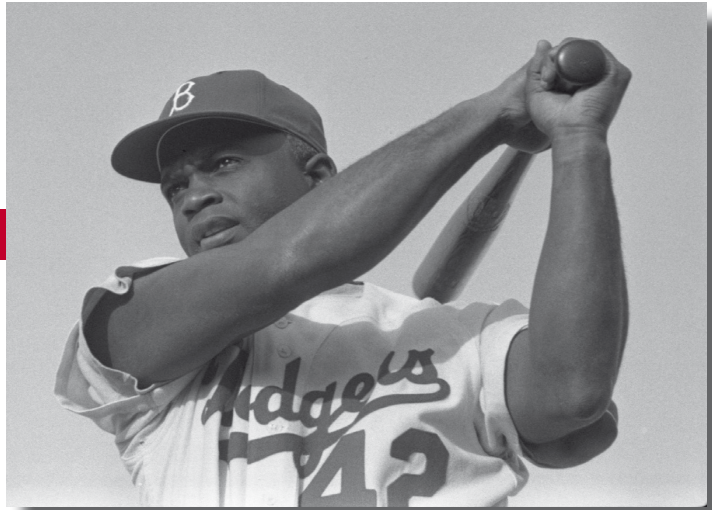
TRADITIONAL VALUES

Documents - The American Dream

## Introduction

*Everyone knows something about the United States, whether it be through films, books, TV series, or songs. Common clichés are that all Americans are fat, carry a weapon, like bad food, and are loud. People say there is a separation between Blacks and Whites, and that all Americans are patriotic. Apart from these clichés, our lives are somewhat affected by America. Why does this country dominate the world? And how do we accurately define Americans and their civilization?*

# 1



## **PART 1 – A HYPERPOWER WITHOUT INFLUENCE?**

It is often written that the United States is surely the world's greatest power. One of the biggest factors in the success of America is in fact that it is: an economic and financial power with the highest GDP in the world, the number one agricultural production, and is ranked number two in exports. Large American multi-nationals, such as Microsoft, contribute greatly to the country's economic influence. It is also the largest capital investor in the world. Since the U.S. dollar is the chosen currency for international trade, it supports their financial actions around the world. The United States is additionally a great cultural and scientific power. Rich with universities and top-notch research laboratories, it is the champion of the Nobel Prize. It dominates international audiovisual production as well, its films and stars exporting to the four corners of the globe.

Finally, its mode of living has become a must, spreading everywhere in the world, even to the furthest corners. Everyone talks about of the "American way of life." Numerous media outlets have

helped spread it, elevating it as the universal lifestyle. The United States is thus the world's number one power, the latter derived from a highly rich territory: it represents a quarter of the Earth's surface area, and holds tremendous, varied and abundant, natural wealth, such as petroleum, natural gas, gold, etc. It has, above all, the most vast transportation network.

Four major natural features can be found in the U.S.: the Atlantic Coast and its narrow plains; the Appalachian Mountains; the great central plains and Mississippi watershed; and the high plateaus and mountains in the West to the Pacific Coast. Alaska and Hawaii must be added, only having been incorporated recently.

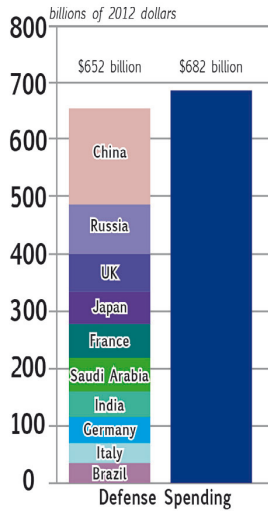
**The United States has established numerous military bases around the world, and does not hesitate in acting as the 'world police'.**

One very important factor in America's power is its mobile population. It possesses a huge and highly skilled labor force, allowing it to respond to corporate demands (about 120 million employees). Moreover, its population represents a major consumer market. The relatively high quality of living in America makes it a sizeable consumer society, which stimulates industrial development. It is the country of free trade, and capitalism, encouraging individual initiative and an innovative spirit.

We talk of the American worker as a "self-made man": someone hard-working, mobile and ambitious. Individual profit appears as a powerful stimulant in the quest for competition. Gigantic companies are very focused at the financial and technical levels. They form trusts and conglomerates, groups, or labor unions in diverse activities whose ramifications are felt around the globe.

Finally, one of the major factors in the success of America is the fact that the State is at the service of businesses. It doesn't hesitate in financing research. Many researchers actually head to the United States, attracted by the profit they can obtain from their work. On top of that, the State provides much assistance to struggling economic sectors and will unwaveringly negotiate advantages for the country's economy, at the global level. However, with the arrival of new sectors on the international scene, American power is now starting to reach its limits. Like other powers, the country was hit by the economic crisis at the beginning of the 2000s, and saw its public deficit increase. A number of competitors have appeared on the world stage. The financial situation has degraded with the trade deficit. This economic down-





This chart is from April 2013 (Source= Peter G. Peterson Foundation) shows that America's 2012 defense budget surpassed that of the next 10 countries combined.

fall has led to social inequality. The American model has now been rejected by certain populations, like the Islamic terrorists.

Besides all that, it can be observed that the United States dominates the G20, created with the goal of encouraging financial international stability; and it being the number one investor, occupies a privileged seat.

It is also a military and political power, having the largest army in the world, and nuclear weapons. It directs N.A.T.O. and is a permanent member of the U.N., having established numerous military bases around the world, and does not hesitate in acting as the "world police", when necessary.

But this superpower seems to have reached its limit and, and at the beginning of the 21st century, the United States appeared unable to transform this amazing potential into an advantage that would allow them to exercise decisive influence on the world. The conflicts in the Middle East, in Iraq and in Syria, the repeated crises with Russia, and the unavoidable appearance of new powers, such as China, reveals America's obvious inability to impose itself on the world. Far from being the dominant model and imperialist some describe it as being, America appears satisfied with its relative power, without seeking to expand it further.



**A. Is America the most successful because people work harder?**

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**B. How do you explain the U.S.'s economic success?**

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## THE U.S. IN 3 MAPS

### FOCUS

When you read about news events in the U.S., you will notice that places are often referred to by region. For instance, it may be specified that an oil spill is affecting the Gulf States; or it may be written that in the Southwest, there are concerns about violence along the border with Mexico. And you may be told that in the Midwest, after months of dismal news, the economic outlook has begun to brighten. These maps will help you make sense of the way areas in the U.S. are referred to. They show that the country is composed of 50 States and that the nation's four main regions as defined by the Census Bureau: the West, Midwest, South, and Northeast. These areas are often defined by physical, cultural, and economic characteristics, not just location. Geographers do not always agree on which States belong to which region or subregion – for example, whether Delaware is a Mid-Atlantic or South Atlantic State. The third map shows the basis of the power of the United States: its main industries and resources.



#### The States

There are 50 states in the United States

### DOCUMENT 1

### DOCUMENT 2

#### The regions

Why are the regions divided in this way?

