

The United States Today: What Has and Has Not Changed since September 11, 2001

- With a population of more than 300 million, the United States is the third most densely inhabited country in the world and the third largest in terms of territory. Every year, the United States adds about 3 million new citizens. Almost 2.5 million of these are newborn babies, and about 500,000 people receive their U.S. citizenship by becoming naturalized citizens, which is a legal process. Today, compared to other nations, the United States remains the leading recipient of immigrants in the world.
- As a typical industrialized nation, the United States has a relatively low birth rate (an average woman gives birth to two children), but at the same time it has one of the highest life expectancy rates in the world: This generation is expected to live approximately 78–80 years. Currently, more than 20 percent of the population in this country is younger than 14, and about 15 percent of Americans are age 65 or older.
- The United States has the largest and most technologically dominant economy in the world. One of the most universal numbers measuring the strength of a nation is the “per capita GDP” or average amount of goods and services produced for one person. In the United States this figure is \$44,000 compared with China’s GDP of \$8,000 or India’s GDP of about \$4,000.
- Seventy-eight percent of the people living in the United States work in service areas including education, local and federal government, health care, and retail and food service. Less than 1 percent of Americans work in the agriculture sector, and 21 percent work in manufacturing.

- The vast majority of American families have at least one car. Almost 70 percent of American adults own a home, according to a 2006 study by the Center for American Progress.

After September 11, 2001

When Americans say “nine eleven,” everyone knows it means September 11, 2001. On that fateful day, four groups of terrorists boarded civilian airplanes and attacked the two buildings of World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon building near Washington, DC. The fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania. More than 3,000 people were killed on that day. Have America and its people changed because of September 11th?

Ask this question of Americans who lived in this country before “nine eleven,” and you will receive, of course, different answers. Many people will say that, indeed, the country has changed considerably. For example, many Americans express serious concerns about the safety of their country and their own families today. The terrorist attacks were a very emotional event for all Americans. We, the authors of the book, live near Washington, DC, and were working just a few miles away from the site of the Pentagon crash. Almost all of the people we spoke to during the days following September 11—our friends and neighbors, students, professors, even people on the street—expressed anxiety and serious concerns about their future. In the fall of 2001, many Americans were afraid to fly and preferred to drive a car or take a train to visit relatives or friends in other parts of the country. All airlines operating in the United States reported a substantial decrease in tickets purchased by Americans at the end of 2001. Some people even decided to leave big cities and move to small towns, feeling that life would be safer there. Overall, observers noticed that many Americans began to pay serious attention to their country’s security.

After the initial period of uncertainty and anxiety in 2001, life eventually went back to a level of normalcy. Some people actually say that their lives haven’t been affected much by the terrorist attacks. Today, life goes on much as it did 10 or 20 years ago. Every morning, as usual, children go to school. Working adults drive or take mass transit to their offices and shops, and others remain very busy at home taking care of household chores. For most, however, there is a lingering sense of caution and vulnerability, and many families have been permanently devastated by the horrible attacks.

Americans were not the only ones affected by the events of 9/11; there were casualties from many other countries, and a great outpouring of concern worldwide. Many people changed their plans to visit the United States, fearing

for their safety, and there was a severe and immediate drop in the number of international students entering the country. The United States government reacted immediately to protect its borders and made significant changes in its structure, policies, and procedures related to immigration, visas, and international travel. Regulations and procedures were tightened and remain focused on maintaining the appropriate level of security for the country.

Since 2002, college enrollment has increased in all states. Americans celebrate national and religious holidays, eat out with their families in restaurants, travel to various places, and visit foreign countries. More Americans fly on passenger airplanes today than ever before in history. A 2005 report issued by the U.S. Department of Transportation indicated that, by 2004, the number of passengers traveling using commercial airlines had exceeded pre-September 11 numbers and has continued to rise (U.S. Department of Transportation 2005).

In general, people's perceptions of their lives are based on many factors and circumstances. To some individuals, their lives have changed for the worse, while to others their situation today is much better than yesterday. Yet there are certain general changes that are possible to see or measure. What specific changes took place in the United States after the events of September 11, 2001?

Immigration and Travel Procedures

The rules to enter the United States and other travel procedures for internationals arriving to America have become more complicated. Almost everyone who lives in a different country and has traveled to the United States before and after 2001 can say that the application process and opportunities to obtain a visa have become, in general, more difficult and timely. The U.S. government has given instructions to all consular sections of the U.S. embassies abroad to make changes in the procedures to obtain a visa. These changes are not intended to keep international guests and students away from the United States. Rather, the most important goal of the changes is to make sure that everyone who enters the United States has good intentions and doesn't want to harm Americans or their interests. Unfortunately, in many instances it seems that the changes are resulting in delays. Overall, many people wait for a long time to get a business, student, or tourist visa to visit the United States. Obviously, such delays and restrictions do not make people happy, and many feel that such restrictions are inefficient and wrong. It is our hope that these limiting measures are only temporary.

Today, everyone entering the United States must be fingerprinted and photographed by the inspection officers. The U.S. government also requires airlines

to provide the lists of passengers in advance of all international flights to America. This allows the government to check the list of passengers against the Terrorist Screening Database (TSDB) to identify people who may be considered “unwelcome” in the United States. Such individuals are typically political activists belonging to various organizations suspected of terrorism or helping terrorist groups. Therefore, an ordinary individual who has never been connected with violent groups or organizations has very little chance to be singled out by this procedure.

To reduce delays, most American airports have made significant changes to improve service and expedite the admission of international guests. For example, the international terminal at Dulles Airport near Washington, DC, has been renovated significantly to accommodate international passengers. It is easy to notice that the line of international guests is frequently moving as fast as the line of American citizens going through passport control checkpoints.

Specific visa and immigration requirements are discussed in Chapter 2.

Attitudes about International Visitors

Overall, international business travel and tourism to the United States decreased in 2001–2003. This negative trend did not last long, however. According to official reports by the U.S. Department of Commerce, international tourists have brought more than \$105 billion to the U.S. economy since 2005. There are more than 50 million international visitors every year, and their number keeps growing! Occasionally, some inaccurate rumors or some media reports suggest that Americans, since 2001, have become intolerant and even rude toward international visitors and immigrants. This is not true! In reality, the vast majority of Americans maintain a tolerant, friendly, and welcoming attitude toward guests from foreign countries. Public opinion studies confirm this observation. Seventy to eighty percent of Americans answering survey questions in 2003–2007 said that they have either positive or very positive views of international tourists and guests. According to national opinion polls, the vast majority of Americans don’t want to limit tourism and student exchanges.

There are many reasons why American people accept and appreciate international guests. We will mention just two of them. First, there is what some people would say is a traditional cultural attitude where Americans respect international guests. America calls itself, “the nation of immigrants.” Unlike most countries in the world, the majority of the people and their ancestors came from other parts of the world. Each year, more than half a million individuals

become U.S. citizens. In addition, the United States annually admits from 50,000–70,000 refugees who are fleeing their home countries because of religious or ethnic oppression and violence.

The other reason for welcoming attitudes is economic. For example, the hotel, restaurant, tourism, and entertainment industries certainly need as many international guests as possible. The more people they accommodate and feed, the more money they make. Between May and September, restaurants and hotels in big cities rely significantly on international tourists.

Nevertheless, many Americans express serious concerns about illegal immigration. Determining who has the right to come, work, and stay in the United States is difficult. One 2006 poll (Shiraev and Sobel 2006) found that Americans were almost evenly split on illegal immigration issues. One-half of American people wanted to give everyone a “temporary” working status, while others rejected this option, saying that every person should come to this country legally. Other opinion polls show that people want to keep their country’s borders protected. For example, a 2006 FOX News poll found that 91 percent of Americans believe that their country has the right to restrict immigration, and only 7 percent believe that the country should keep open borders (Shiraev and Sobel 2006). A majority of Americans believe that the rules according to which people can get a visa to enter the United States should become more restrictive.

In sum, the American people welcome guests from over the world but prefer to make sure that law and order prevail.

Changes at School

Ask students or professors in any university or college in the United States, and almost everyone will say that international students are more than welcome to come and study in this country. International students are eagerly anticipated and treated with kindness and respect. In fact, the attitudes at university campuses in America clearly reflect the overall atmosphere of the nation. Most international guests who come to the United States to study, learn, or do business are very welcome. In fact, according to the 2007 Open Doors report, 582,984 international students study in the United States. These students contribute \$14.5 billion to the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education 2007).

Nevertheless, some important changes took place in colleges and universities after September 11, 2001. Today, for example, school administrators pay attention to international students who register for classes but do not show up. We certainly understand that there are many reasons why a student pays tuition but doesn’t attend lectures. A person can be sick or very busy trying to

resolve a family problem or another emergency situation. Some students may leave the country for important personal reasons (such as illness in the family, wedding, etc.), and they don't inform the authorities about the absence. In these cases, a problem may occur because school administration now has to make sure that the person who was supposed to study is, in fact, studying. We offer more detail on this in Chapter 2.

This may appear to some students as unnecessary or excessive attention to students' personal lives. On the other hand, we all must realize that although we have the right to do what we consider important, universities and colleges also have the right to verify who attends classes and who does not. It is very easy to avoid complications and potential problems if the student simply informs his or her professor, department chair, counselor, or a dean about the temporary absence and the reasons for not being in class. According to a 2006 Public Agenda Foundation poll (Shirayev and Sobel 2006), tighter control over international students who come to our colleges and universities to study was supported by almost 80 percent of Americans. This topic and the issue of attendance will be discussed several times in this book.

It is a mistake to think that, except for a few restrictions, nothing else has changed in the universities and colleges. There are, in fact, many welcoming changes that have taken place in many other areas of college life over the past several years. For example, significant changes have taken place in several academic programs, especially in the fields of history, social science, and political science. You will find out very soon how much attention colleges and universities pay to the disciplines related to foreign countries and cultures, international relations, world languages, comparative studies, international business, and international law! These subjects have been important and popular in the past; today, their popularity has significantly increased. There are more classes offered related to international and global issues, more discussion of world events is supported, and more international events take place on campus.

Looking for Answers

Following the events of 2001, many Americans began to ask why these terrorist acts were committed against their country. In fact, this was the first attack ever in the United States since 1814 when the British troops occupied portions of American territory and captured Washington, DC, the United States capitol. This most recent tragic event made most Americans think about their country and its role in international affairs.

The United States is a country founded on the ideas of fundamental political freedoms where people are accustomed to expressing their free opinions about any issue. Unlike many other countries in the world, Americans may speak and write without restraint about the government, the President, the Congress, and the country in general. At different times, many people may criticize the government and the President, but support them at other times. Not every American shares the same opinion about why or who was responsible for the events of September 11th. Americans also disagree on whether or not the American government was right or wrong to start the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In trying to find answers, many Americans express critical views about their own government and its foreign policies. This is not something unique about the American people. Sociologists and political scientists will certainly show that over the last 60 years, Americans have been in general disagreement with each other about the country's foreign policy (Shiraev and Sobel 2006). Some people support the policies of the government, suggesting that America has the right to protect and guarantee stability and peace in the world. Others have different opinions, suggesting that the United States has no business telling other countries how to live their lives. And still others say that regardless of the U.S. foreign policy, there will be many people around the world who simply dislike America and the values for which it stands, reasoning that no matter what kind of foreign policy the United States has, there will always be criticism against it. Yet some say that the United States must engage in international affairs but handle it differently by sharing and helping other countries rather than using its military power. Many people today believe that a collective action through international organizations is better than doing things alone. For instance, more than 61 percent of Americans maintain a mostly or very favorable opinion of the United Nations (Shiraev and Sobel 2006). According to several national surveys, a majority of Americans take considerable pride in a few features of U.S. foreign policy. Most remarkably, they take great satisfaction in "helping other countries when natural disasters strike": An impressive 83 percent of respondents give the government high marks (Shiraev and Sobel 2006).

Overall, many important changes took place in the lives of American people: Americans today read more about international relations and other countries. The average American wants to know more about the events in the world. People continue to travel to foreign countries to learn and compare. According to a 2006 study by Harvard University and the *Washington Post* (Shiraev and Sobel 2006), 55 percent of Americans have either visited or lived in a foreign country and the number of people traveling abroad keeps rising.

Americans' Opinions

Despite the changes that are taking place in the world today and despite tensions and discussions about the United States past and future, Americans as people, on the whole, represent a happy nation. The Pew Research Center, a leading international public opinion center, conducted a survey in 2007 (Shiraev and Sobel 2006) that asked this simple question: “*How would you say things are these days in your life—are you happy?*” More than 85 percent of people said that they were very happy or somewhat happy. Despite some critical comments you hear from your American friends regarding high gasoline prices, traffic problems, and environmental issues, America, in general, is a nation of optimistic people. For example, 52 percent of Americans, according to a 2006 Economic Policy Institute Survey, believe that the quality of their lives is better now than that of the previous generations (Shiraev and Sobel 2006). Only 11 percent, which is little more than one in ten people, believes that the quality of life is worse. About one-third of people believe that the quality has not changed much over the years. This means that one out of two U.S. citizens believes that she or he lives better than his or her parents 20 or 30 years ago (Shiraev and Sobel 2006).

American people maintain diverse opinions on a variety of issues. On one hand, this is a nation of people who believe in science and technology. Americans are exposed to information on a daily basis; 99 percent of Americans watch at least some television every day. More than 230 million people in this country use the Internet and email for their communications. More than 30 percent of Americans have received college degrees (Greenberg Research 2006).

Americans are a pragmatic nation. They believe in reason and common sense. Yet America is also a religious nation. About 95 percent of Americans say they believe in God. This number hasn't changed since the 1950s. Another opinion poll (*Time/SRBI* 2006) conducted in 2006 showed that 80 percent of people in the United States believe in miracles. Most Americans express environmental concerns and believe that the government and private businesses should do more to reduce pollution. On the other hand, according to a 2007 study by the Associated Press and America Online, 66 percent of all American families own big vehicles such as a mini-van, pick-up truck, or SUV.

In the media, we often hear about how easy it is to obtain a divorce in America and that many people do not give serious attention to marriage. Opinion polls show that more than 75 percent of Americans believe that if a marriage does not go well, the couple has the right to seek divorce. However, statistics show that more than 70 percent of married Americans have never been divorced, and only 20 percent—one couple out of five—have been divorced once (7 percent divorced twice).

These are just a few examples of diversity in actions and opinions. People in the United States represent a very large and diverse nation. Learn to understand American life from different perspectives. Talk to people, ask them to express their opinion, and try to understand their position. The more questions you ask, the more complete picture of the American life you will obtain.

End Note

This is the only section in *The Accent of Success, Second Edition*, that addresses the tragic events of 9/11. The rest of the text has been updated to reflect some changes in practice and statistics. The book remains a guide for studying in the United States, which we consider to be a wonderful and valuable opportunity.