

► *We can be proud of these
American characteristics.*

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE WE?

BY ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

BEFORE we start rearranging the rest of the world after this war, we had better find out what kind of people we are ourselves. Nations and families often do not know what they are like until some outsider, say an aunt, comes along and tells them.

I had a New England aunt whose chief business in life was telling our family our strong points and our weak points, especially our weak. She came twice a year and straightened us all out, with herb remedies and moral precepts. Some of our worst features, we discovered from Aunt Emma, were minor habits that gave a wrong impression of us to the outside world.

Minor peculiarities and odd ways of doing things can exasperate one's neighbors more than major sins. It has always been so among nations, since history began. The old Akkadians mortally estranged the people

of Ur by wearing beards. The people of Ur ate fat meat, and the Akkadians hated them for that habit and did their best to exterminate them. Underneath these superficial differences these nations had many sterling traits in common. And if they had been able to see these, they would have built up a civilization that would have defied the Chaldeans and Babylonians for centuries. But they could not see their common humanity for the whiskers and fat meat. So they fought each other and perished. And the Babylonians and Chaldeans — who wore whiskers and ate fat meat also, by the way — came and possessed their lands.

It is good to have a chance to see ourselves through other nations' eyes. For maybe we Americans have some ways of doing things that conceal our good points from our neighbors across the water. If

ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN *was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1936, and is the author of some two dozen books of verse, essays and fiction. He has been Pierce professor of English at Bowdoin College since 1934, and he has also lectured and read his poems at other academic institutions, including Columbia, Wellesley, Colby, Tufts, Hamilton, Boston, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Indiana and Wisconsin.*

it isn't whiskers, maybe it is something just as obscuring.

I have been lucky. Twice I have lived for long periods in countries oversea and so have been able to get a perspective on Americans I never would have got in any other way. First time, it was France, and I was a soldier, in World War I. It was a terrific shock to me to discover what the French thought of their American allies. It wasn't the grownup French who shocked me. They were too polite and careful of my feelings. It was the French children — girls in black dresses and boys in pinafores so you couldn't be sure they were boys till they turned around and showed they had a fork in their clothes after all. The French children thought all Americans were gluttons, drunkards, and overgrown boys. Not just one or another of these, but all three. That was their frank opinion. And nobody can be franker than children. Or wiser. Mind you, the French children loved the American soldiers. That was partly why they were so frank. They always poured out and got underfoot when our band played, and they shared all our meals with us while we were in their villages. I ate many a meal with a pair of Gallic breeches, yearning to be filled, straddling each of my knees.

I know why those French children thought us all gluttons and drunkards and boys. They trusted their eyes. To their eyes we were all three. For we were not used to their wine. A drink that a five-year-old French boy could swallow without batting a brunette eyelash knocked the strong blond men in my regiment galley-west. Therefore all Americans were habitually flattened by drink. And we had meat three times a day in our mess. The French children saw it with their own beady eyes. They helped us eat it. French people had meat only once or twice a week. Therefore Americans were all gluttons. And we played with the French children as their fathers and older brothers and uncles never did. We came down to their level and played tag and pitched pennies with them. With only a few of their words, we got on with them splendidly. So all Americans must be overgrown boys.

Out of those three French impressions, two are grounded upon superficialities. But the third is pure gold. We *are* a nation of people who can play easily with our children. We play more with our children than any other people on earth except maybe the Chinese. That is one of the greatest achievements of our civilization and one of our best assets as a nation. I see by

the pictures from Sicily that American doughboys are still taking children on their knees and feeding them and teaching them to smile again in spite of war. We discovered children in our pioneer days, when they were the most important crop that men who had states to settle could raise. We go on paying a lot of attention to that crop. We should thank those French children for calling our attention to our wealth.

II

Then I had a chance to set up housekeeping, when my wife and I were brand-new to each other, in England. It was in a village eight hundred years old. My wife and I got to know everybody in it from Schoolmistress Bley to the Lady of the Manor and on to the red-faced man who swept the street clean with a fagot-broom and slept an hour each noon on his wheelbarrow under our cottage window. We cooked over an open hearth. We played whist and tennis at the Village Institute. We kept hens and part of a pig. We got to know a lot about the English, and they got to know a lot about us in return. For though I was in the University, I was also a father and a householder and so got to know the

older and younger English people who are outside the University family. Older English people are a revelation in warmth, after the rather icy undergraduates. The English mellow late. My wife and I got a thorough education in British democracy such as only those who buy their own breakfast kippers and keep their own house can acquire.

It is what the English taught us about ourselves that I want to talk about.

Of course, after a year or so of being neighbors to us, our English friends took to regarding us as creatures very much like themselves. It came as a surprise to them that fundamentally we were like them. It was amazing, but we were. It makes me think of what one small Englishman, in breeches only as long as a man's hand, said of our first baby. He had been let out of school, in company with all his schoolmates, to see an American infant. And he was bitterly disappointed. I heard him voicing his disappointment under our cottage window. "Why," said he to another boy, "it's just like any baby!" He had expected a swarthy papoose, with feathers and a tomahawk maybe. The pink and gold skin and hair had been a great shock.

But it was because our neighbors

did come to regard us as much the same kind of people as themselves that they became sharp enough to notice and frank enough to tell us what it was that they found in Americans that was fundamentally different from characteristics that are English. And no one can be franker than a cousin, when he gets to know you.

First off, the English agreed with the French children. We paid too much attention to our children. They saw my wife and me with our first-born. They caught me bathing it. They caught me wheeling my first-born in a pram. They caught us building our future life around that infant of ours. It was not an incident. It was a future. So they told us that Americans humor children too much, play with them too much, dress them too well, keep them at home too long — especially if they are boys — and work their fingers to the bone to build security for them. It was too bad. Life went by and left parents just parents.

Guilty, say II And I am sure most Americans would be proud to plead guilty, too. If Americans overdo things, it is in the best of causes. Children are the most real of real property. My father had ten, and he slaved all his life as a free man, and had a righteous good

time, educating us and building a house or fixing up a farm for each one of us. Of course, none of us living has needed the inheritance. We have been too busy acquiring farms and houses for our own offspring, who probably won't need them.

Our English neighbors were shocked at our doing so much for ourselves, too, and with our own hands. Our passion for labor worried them. I don't know how often they blushed at seeing me bringing parcels on my bike or on the bus. English gentlemen never carried things, they finally blurted out. They never pushed them, either, I discovered. For I scandalized our village by wheeling our baby in the perambulator all through the lanes and to Oxford and beyond. No British father since Hengist and Horsa had ever done such a thing. It was woman's work. Why shouldn't I wheel my own baby? I asked my frank friends who told me it just wasn't done. In England there are two sets of human beings: those who work with their hands and carry things; those who work with their heads and have things brought to them.

The beauty of American history is that we have combined the two sets. Our Yankee sea captains helped build their own ships with ham-

mers and adzes, and helped sail them by using their hands on lines and gear. The wives who sailed with them could be the fine ships' ladies and yet do a good day's housework, too. It is a new woman in civilization who can write in a ship's diary: *Done a big washing and ironing and mended John's pants and went on board of Capt. Thurlow this evening and took tea.* As pioneers, we had to be carpenters and plowers, even when we were law-makers and teachers. We have never got over these basic occupations. Our women sew and wash dishes and children, and then go out and hold their own in cultured conversation. They have always done so. Our men, no matter what estates they have achieved, have never got over Thomas Jefferson's love of making gadgets and doing a little carpentering here and a little plumbing there, for themselves, in between business conferences or state papers.

We are a nation in shirt-sleeves. We like to put our hands in dirt and get it on our trousers, as our ancestors did. We take our coats off and sail into the weeds in the garden, and we lose no caste in the eyes of our neighbor. He is up to the eyes in the "innerds" of his Ford and couldn't see us if he tried.

Oh yes, our English friends took

us to task for Americans' taking their coats off in public and going in shirt and trousers. I had the right come-back for that. Our shirts are finished as decorous outside garments, unlike the frankly night-shirt-like British. Our trousers are outside ones, too. They are not ones that come up to the shoulder blades in unsightly bedroom style. If I wore British pants, I would die before I took my coat off in public!

We Americans are too apt to take chances in matrimony also, we discovered from our English friends. We plunge into matrimony without any adequate preparations, in the way of career or income. We marry young. We marry at first sight, or second. We make mistakes. Again I plead guilty. Our divorce rate is shocking. We marry right out of college often. And even in. We marry on a shoestring. But it is something of a comfort to point out to the world that we Americans, who are so often dubbed crass materialists by the Europeans, have never had the dowry system of Europe or the long-deferred engagements of the English people, who wish to be sure of the economic basis of marriage before they rush into it. We have always divorced marriage from money. We have let affection, and even passion, take

the place of a settlement of money on a wife as the proper foundation for raising a family. We fall in love, rather than fall into a fortune, when we do our leaping. Of course, we make mistakes. But we show more courage and idealism, on the whole, I think, in our daring to rush, young and empty-handed, into the greatest adventure of them all.

And Americans travel too much. Our English villagers were pretty unanimous on that point. Not one of the 463 English adults in our village had ever been to Stratford-on-Avon, forty-two miles to the north. Of course, when one considers what the commercialization of culture has done for Shakespeare's home town, one can sympathize a little with the English. But the villagers had not been to other places much either. They stayed at home pretty much all the time. They had never seen their own cathedrals, or Devon, or Wordsworth's lakes.

Somehow or other, in pleading guilty to this charge of loving to be on the go, I think Americans are to be praised for their desire to broaden themselves by seeing the old cradles in Europe from which their fathers sprang. Of course, there is a lot of lost motion with us. We travel too much for travel's sake. We make

too much of mere sightseeing. Yet hungry-eyed schoolmarmes drinking in castles and churches have somehow drunk in a lot of glory and strength that have borne fine fruit in high school courses and made better citizens of lots of young Americans. We have always believed in travel as an educator, just as we have believed in education by lectures. The English have mistrusted both. But naïve as we may seem to them to be, I think we have learned a good deal and grown a good deal towards world citizenship by going over the battlefield of Gettysburg, the Alps, seeing the Grand Canyon and Winchester Cathedral. Odysseus learned a lot that made him a better citizen from travel. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson did, too.

III

Yes, and we make too much of saying *hello* to everybody and being friendly at the least chance. Our English neighbors were sure of that. We depend too much on a surface neighborliness.

Maybe we do. Especially in the states west of the Appalachians. But from having lived in the Hoosier State, I should say that friendliness — even casual surface friendliness — is a good thing to make too

much of. Again it is a pioneer failing, if it is a failing. It is a poetic thing, this going out of ourselves to meet strangers more than halfway. It is the best way to find poems, I have discovered. For, chances are, if you go out of your shell halfway, the stranger will come out of his, sparkling over with poetry. It seems to me that this poetry of human sympathy is a pretty fair foundation for the democracy in the world at large we want to build tomorrow.

And, lastly, we Americans, according to our English neighbors, are forever wanting to change our *status quo*, wanting to get somewhere else from where we are, wanting to become something else. Fishermen's sons want to become mechanics, professors' sons want to become fishermen. Farmers' sons yearn to become railroad men. We are a restless and tiring people. We love change.

We do love change. We are restless. But it seems to me to be a kind of noble restlessness that eats us, and we do want to better ourselves, usually, want to go up in the world, make something more of ourselves, mentally as well as financially, than our fathers left us. Almost every American city is a monument to America's divine discontent. Our cities change shape faster than any

other cities on earth. And usually they do not grow merely in the direction of material improvement. Our tall ugly buildings become the taller lovelier ones of New York's skyline today. Our architecture, our art, our literature, our music, are constantly on the make, as well as our railroads and automobiles. Improvement on one plane very often induces improvement on others.

Every son must rise above his father. That is the New World physics to which we heartily subscribe. It isn't the physics of the Old World. *No river ever rises higher than its source.* That is the physics Europe believed in for two thousand years. But some Europeans would not subscribe to that physics. So they packed up and came over the sea. They wanted a new physics. For that reason men of totally different bloods and religions and political theories came into this wilderness that was America and tried the experiment of mingling bloods and brains. To escape that physics of their ancestors, Englishmen, Scotsmen, Irish, Dutch, French, and Germans bled themselves white, worked their fingers to the bone, fought Philistines more terrible than insect-men from another planet, hungered, thirsted, starved. They believed in the new

physics of a man's improving on the politics and culture and noses and foreheads of his fathers. For this they lived in log huts, plowed among stones and roots, drained marshes, overturned mountains, knew vast loneliness for years and lives on end, endured polar cold, wore out their shoes, put on deer-skin, felled forests, built churches and courthouses and state capitols and hospitals and colleges by the thousands to Europe's hundreds. For this they dared the dangerous experiment of giving schooling to all, of making rail-splitters and farmers the leaders of the people, of making fast, fine vehicles the property of every family. For this they moved mountains and sweat blood.

It was not enough for us to believe in common man. We have believed in him from the beginning of our history. The "century of the common man" has been about three centuries long so far. It was an extra belief that kept us going through Indian wars and Civil War — the belief that the common man can become an uncommon man. We have already produced a lot of

him. Jefferson, born to silks and daring to make farmers and day-laborers into the cornerstones of the state, was one. So was the man who dared give the black people equality with the white. So were the ministers of the gospel and bankers who dared put college education into the poorest man's reach. So were the millionaires who dared spread free libraries and museums over the country. So were the benefactors who built great foundations in medicine and scientific research. We are a nation built squarely on the risk of improving ourselves to the limit of the blue sky.

I am mighty glad my neighbors in France and England, through their criticism of our outside appearance, called my attention to the possibilities we Americans have as potential leading citizens in the world democracy to come. Great love for children, eagerness to learn by travel, daring in social experiments, friendliness, and a profound passion for improving ourselves ought to stand us in good stead in the new turn history will take after this war.



THE WORLD'S RICHEST MINE

BY ROSS L. HOLMAN

THE earth's most fabulous mine is the ocean. It is chock-full of precious metals and chemicals for which a ration-mad world is starving. It would require only a trickle of its vast resources to break bottlenecks by the dozen and priorities by the score.

This estimate of sea wealth is not the fantasy of a crackpot dreamer, but of highly responsible chemists. Some of the finished products manufactured out of the briny deep are already in wide commercial production and the demands of war are stepping up the output at a greatly increased rate. Sea water contains gold, silver, radium, iodine, salt, bromine, chlorine, copper, calcium and many other elements. A great variety of sea weeds, known collectively as algae, contain still more. The problem of getting these untapped treasures into the service of humanity is no longer one of discovery, but of chemical skill. Un-

like earth mining you don't have to go prospecting all over the ocean's wide expanses for the wealth you are seeking. Each gallon of sea water has just about as much of it as any other gallon.

While it wasn't the first product to which sea water gave birth, magnesium has captured the spotlight as one vital wartime metal that the ocean raised from a condition of scarcity to one of superabundance. Before the first World War, Germany supplied all the magnesium we needed and we needed mighty little. During that conflict the Dow Chemical Company made from its Michigan salt wells the first magnesium manufactured in this country. Up to recently such amounts of this metal as we used came from the ground, but chemists now say that it can be processed from sea water with much less effort because it eliminates the need of washing it from the dirt. The magnesium

ROSS L. HOLMAN is a Tennessee farmer and comes from a long line of farmers. He finds enough time to follow closely the major scientific advances and to write about them for the magazines.