



Opinion

California Rambling: Americans, ugly or not?

By **John Poimiroo** From page A4 | July 20, 2015

In Eugene Burdick's 1958 novel, "The Ugly American," a fictitious Burmese journalist says, "For some reason, the (American) people I meet in my country are not the same as the ones I knew in the United States. A mysterious change seems to come over Americans when they go to a foreign land. They isolate themselves socially. They live pretentiously. They are loud and ostentatious."

This and other descriptions of Americans overseas in Burdick's novel helped to reinforce the image of Americans as culturally insensitive know-it-alls, one that was reinforced in the 1969 so-called romantic comedy, "If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium," in which a bus load of boorish Americans take an 18-day tour of Europe while making an endless series of insulting comments and observations.

But, the characters in the book and the film were fictional. How does the world really see Americans? Are we ugly or not?

Rene Zografos new book, "Attractive Unattractive Americans, How The World Sees America" (Renessanse Publishing, August 2015), seeks to refresh our view of ourselves by reporting how others see us.

Zografos, one of Norway's best-known journalists and authors, traveled the world to ask people what they like and dislike about America. He found the obvious, but also the unexpected.

How we view ourselves is actually not inflated. America's might is a reflection of the profound economic, military, philosophical and cultural impact that our country has had on the world. Zografos admits, similarly, "No other nation has such a short and valiant history as America. No other country is comparable and no other country is as famous as America."

What this results in is that "Every adult human being on the globe knows something, and even feels something about America," he writes, "but what do they really know?"

In Zografos' book, observers from other lands sometimes describe us spot on accurately and, at other times, they miss the point entirely.

If we are anything as a people, we are born competitors. That's a big part of what makes us so successful. We smirk at international soccer players who grovel on the ground like cry babies, feigning injury while attempting to influence a foul or stall for time. To us, that behavior is a reprehensible cultural weakness that reveals the player as not man enough to cowboy up and win by being the best competitor.

We don't settle for second-best. As a Scotsman quoted in the book says, "You are the greatest sports nation in the world, and it's probably because you are all so stubborn." European business consultant Cecilie Ystenes credits our winning mentality as so ingrained in American culture that families provide support in attaining the American Dream, "all the way to the finish line."

Other observers are critical of our convenience-oriented, throw-away consumerism, though miss seeing how most of the truly substantive steps toward environmental protection began here.

Or, they ridicule us for our many dumb laws left on the books — such as that in Chicago it's illegal to fish in one's pajamas — but these are mostly archaic laws that aren't enforced, and that Americans equally and universally think are stupid.

Americans are convinced the USA is best-off of the world's countries, but scattered throughout "Attractive, Unattractive Americans" are anecdotes, statistics and lists that state contrarily that the U.S. is 25th in well-being for mothers and that it is the 12th most prosperous nation on Earth.

Where we do lead the world is how many hours we work. We're first in putting in more hours of work each week than any other industrialized nation, "a month more than the Japanese and three months more than Germans, annually."

Revealing throughout the book is the resentment that other nationalities feel toward America, not because of what we do here but because what we do here is overwhelming their cultures and ways of life.

Elements of our culture seep into theirs (think hip hop and skate boarding) but other than our obsession with fusing their foods with ours (Tex-Mex), we mostly ignore world events, music, movies, sports, philosophies and technologies developed elsewhere. Instead, our companies aggressively promote our conveniences, music, movies, sports and technologies, diluting the distinctions found in other cultures, while thinking all the world is a melting pot, just like us.

A Swedish woman sums it up, “We don’t hate America as a nation; we just hate their attitude toward the rest of the world.” Another Swedish miss writes, “Was Twitter what was needed for Americans to discover the rest of the world?” And Khalid, also from Stockholm comments, “Americans believe that the rest of the world is different from them. Not the other way around.”

Are we so different from all other countries? If we have any universally accepted positive traits, they are service and hospitality, even when it is transparently superficial. Most of those from other countries are wowed by the friendly service they receive everywhere throughout the USA, but also frown on having to pay tips — not accepting the connection between the two. In America, jobs are not guaranteed, they’re earned; the same with rewards. Whereas, often elsewhere they’re expectations, regardless of performance.

There are few other absolutes to be found in “Attractive, Unattractive Americans.” Some overseas observers see us positively, others negatively. The one thing that is consistent with Rene Zografos’ introduction is that when it comes to America, everyone has an opinion.

“Attractive, Unattractive Americans” will be available in August on Amazon.com, at Barnes & Noble and in main street bookstores nationwide. More is found at renezografos.com.

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