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EXPLORATIONS IN AMERICAN LIFE AND CULTURE

collet Mall

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Explorations in American Life and Culture

 **ELIANUM**

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Introduction

It is impossible to learn a foreign language without acquiring the culture it embraces. Even by teaching the first words and the simplest conversational patterns, teachers perpetuate different cultural concepts and modes of behaviour. For example, the basic concept *lunch* has a very different meaning in Slovakia (where it usually means a two-dish meal, served at a table), in Britain (where it could refer to a bag of vinegar-flavoured crisps) and in the USA (where it often means a quick stop at Subway or Chipotle). A response to the question *How are you?* also differs from country to country. In some countries, the only socially acceptable answer is simple and pre-formatted (*I'm fine*); in others it is almost impolite not to go into great length, and not to mention individual members of one's family, their medical condition, job and social life. Thus, proper functioning in the new culture might be even more important than mere mastering the linguistic rules of a foreign language.

Needless to say, such social competencies expand regular day-to-day informal situations. In business, closing a contract often depends on prompt, properly formulated and culturally sensitive reactions to various proposals. Interpreters also greatly profit from cultural awareness; they often function not only as transmitters of the discourse but also as cultural "bridges", merging two or more different cultures. For example, the direct and brief answer "no" may in some cultures sound impolite and disrespectful. It is the interpreter's task to re-formulate it into a socially more palatable style and form of response.

A competent language speaker has to be both "linguagewise" and "culturewise" in order to understand the multiple forms of use of a foreign language in various unrehearsed situations and to be able to react spontaneously yet appropriately. Therefore some scholars speak about "**the art of crossing cultures.**" Whether culture can be taught is an unresolved question. Some believe acquiring a new culture is a life-long process. The aim of this coursebook is ambitious; it attempts to provide information related to many areas of daily life in the USA such as politics, economics, law, education and arts, to name a few, including necessary vocabulary accompanied by Slovak translations and explanations. The coursebook, however, is not all-inclusive; students are welcomed to extend their competence via recommended web-pages and sources. It is the hope of the authors that students will develop a passion for learning new facts about the USA, but also an academic and objective attitude and tolerance towards new cultures which they would further disseminate to their students and peers. Teaching and learning cultural studies should promote better understanding

among people and nations, not only by learning about differences, but also the similarities that connect them.

I would like to express my gratitude to all who contributed to this coursebook, by written text, advice, inspiration or understanding its importance. These include:

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Jana Javorčíková

Michael E. Dove

How to Use This Book

Each chapter starts with a set of introductory questions that are directly or indirectly answered in that chapter. New vocabulary is presented in the grey box at the beginning of each chapter. However, some words are not directly mentioned in the text of the chapter; students are to look up these individually. After each theoretical part, the Follow-up section offers a set of exercises that help students to organize and review the information they have gathered in the chapter.

Some cultural studies terminology and related vocabulary is difficult to translate into Slovak, so the Slovak translation of the more complicated terms are included in brackets (usually in italics and indicated by the abbreviation “SK”) when we feel they facilitate understanding of the issue in question.

The coursebook is primarily aimed at Slovak students of American studies; therefore, many data or phenomena are compared to those in Slovakia. Nevertheless, the text is also understandable to those who are not acquainted with Slovak “realia” and who want to extend their knowledge of American culture.

As the book is designed to stimulate discussion, each chapter is accompanied by a **Follow-up** section in which one or several sets of questions are suggested for pair or group work or classroom discussion.

Note: The sections written by Michael Dove use American English. The sections written by J. Javorčíková use British English.