



AMERICA AS PERCEIVED BY ENGLISH AND AMERICAN SCHOOL CHILDREN

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"Oversexed, overpaid, and over here" were terms frequently used to describe the American presence in Britain after World War II. American soldiers and millions of tourists helped to form and perpetuate such British perceptions of America. During the last three decades, the mass media—especially television—have played the largest role in forming these images of our country. This paper examines the perceptions of an age group which is particularly vulnerable to the influences of the media.

Two age groups were surveyed at Arnold Hill Comprehensive School, located in a middle class suburb of Nottingham, England; also surveyed was a third group of geography students at Kit Carson Middle School in Sacramento. The first English group, consisting of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, were members of a current events class. They were requested to write a composition entitled: "My Impressions of America."

The students' comments were quite revealing. Twenty out of twenty-seven students submitting papers volunteered that their ideas were formed by the mass media,

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especially television. Foremost among their impressions was that America is a land of violence. One student wrote:

I get the impression that it is not safe to walk out in the streets alone without being mugged or shot.

Following violence in frequency of mention were big cars (11), skyscrapers (9), drugs (7), and America's diversity (7). A typical student comment follows:

We get the impression that Americans are always eating hamburgers and live in huge skyscrapers in the polluted and overcrowded cities.

Another student described the role of bigness in American culture. He stated:

They (the Americans) have to have the biggest and the best. If a country has a new technological advancement, the Americans will have something better. America always has to have the largest cars, apartment blocks, etc.

The same student further elaborated:

America seems to pull everything out of proportion. A simple football game and up goes a 200,000 capacity stadium full of gadgets like scoreboards with sarcastic comments every time something slightly unusual happens. Rows of girls with pom-poms and frilly knickers chanting for their particular team. Even simple hamburgers have to be twice the normal size. They won't make do with three or four ice cream flavors; they have to have over thirty to choose from.

Yet another student commented on the frantic pace of American life as well as bigness:

It seems to be a country that is full of people that are always having heart attacks, going skate-boarding or taking drugs. The people tend to have big cars and big houses; they eat steak most of the time and everything in their houses is mechanized.

Besides seeing diversity in America's landscape, this group saw contrasts in America's population, including diverse groups like the wealthy, the ghetto dweller, and "cowboys camping out under the moonlight eating baked

beans." Still other ideas volunteered by this group included the notion that Americans do not provide care for the underprivileged, and the conception of America's commercialism, as well as its beautiful scenery.

In order to obtain a cross-cultural comparison, a second English group and an American group of similar ages (twelve to fourteen years) were surveyed. The former group consisted of 97 pupils and the latter of 150 from a Sacramento middle school. For consistency, the same questions were posed to both groups:

1. What kind of place is America?
2. What kind of place is California?
3. Draw a map of what you think America looks like. Put ten or more places on the map.

The responses to the first question by the English pupils are similar to that of the older English group. Fifty-nine of ninety-seven pupils volunteered that America is a large place. In order of frequency the following features of America were suggested: skyscrapers (18), wealth (13), movie stars and TV entertainers (13), hot climate (12), a busy place (11), large automobiles (11), and crime and violence (10).

The following impressions of one English pupil summarize some of the typical, positive and negative perceptions of our country;

America is a very pleasant place on the geography side. But the thing that spoils America is its drug pushing, its vandalism, its murders and its skyscrapers. The country itself is beautiful. The Grand Canyon. The Disney Wonderland. They have many superstars, the late John Wayne, Frank Sinatra, the late Elvis Presley, the late Bing Crosby. They have very big cars that use lots of petrol.

By contrast, the Sacramento students stressed that America is a free country. Forty-one in the American sample mentioned the notion of freedom. Interestingly, there was

no mention of freedom in either of the English samples. Other features mentioned by the Sacramento group included niceness (21), pollution (20), diverse scenery (14), poor government (13), diverse cultures (12), large country (1), violence (10), country of fifty states (10), and peace loving (9). A positive assessment was offered by one of the advanced pupils:

America is made up of mountains, rivers, valleys, deserts, and many different people of different races and cultures. America is also a land of opportunity where people get a good education and good jobs. Although we live in a land of different ideas, we all work together as one.

Another typical American view follows:

America is a smog-filled but peaceful place with a democratic government that protects the innocent (sic) and puts away the guilty.

In responses to the second question on California, the media influence is very obvious. California is, of course, one of the most readily recognized of American place names and is frequently portrayed in the media, especially because of the Southern California entertainment industry. California's large size was mentioned most frequently by the younger Nottingham group (39 responses). Other features mentioned were a hot climate (36), a desert (23), numerous large cities (14), movie stars and films (13), scenic resources (12), violence (12), and pollution (11). Also associated with California were skyscrapers, mountains, a large population, crowdedness, skate-boarding, beaches, and numerous cars.

The following impression represents the typical point of view of a Nottingham adolescent:

California is a very large place with tall skyscrapers, a very hot climate, and it is a very busy place. In some parts of California, it is very dry and barren. It also has polluted air.

One child with a well-nurtured media impression of California saw it as a "place where westerns are shot that is

barren and sandy." Another boy with a negative view of the state wrote that California is:

. . . hot and loads of people on pot, whizzing about on skateboards. Cops running about and shooting people.

A girl who had similar negative views noted that California was a:

Very hot, crowded part of America. Lots of vandalism and murders, etc.

Some impressions, though, were positive, as was this one offered by a fourteen-year-old:

California is a nice hot and sunny place with many beaches where the water is warm. It has many good shops and a lot of skate parks.

California students proved less willing to talk about their own state than did English pupils. The images of Sacramento youngsters tended to be less specific and to place less emphasis on the state's negative features. For example, twenty-one pupils described California as "nice," while another twenty-one described the region as "beautiful." Sixteen pupils volunteered that the state was a good place to live; but only ten mentioned agricultural resources such as good soils, despite living in the state's agricultural heartland. Other features volunteered included pollution problems, large population and area, and beaches. Only five Sacramento pupils mentioned the sunshine for which California is so famous.

As they did in responding to the first question, the California students also wrote shorter responses about their home state:

"It is a state."

"It is a famous place."

"It is pretty good but there are a lot of earthquakes and a lot of thieves."

Some students, however, were willing to provide a detailed response. For example, the pupil who made the

following response was one of the very few to recognize the wide geographic diversity which exists in her own home state:

California to me is a state of beauty consisting of deserts, plains, mountains, forests, etc. It is also a great melting pot consisting of many different minorities. The people of California are a people of change pushing forward in technology for their own future.

While this writer served as a Fulbright exchange teacher in England, he usually was introduced as the visitor from America; and the terms United States or U.S.A. were seldom used. Accordingly, the purpose of the third question was to determine whether or not the pupils perceived "America" as including only the United States. When both groups were asked to draw a freehand map of America from memory, the results provided some interesting contrasts. Forty-four percent of the English students included both North and South America in their mental maps of America, while only 9 percent of the Sacramento pupils included both continents (see Figures 1, 2, 3). Seventy percent of the American youngsters, compared with 24 percent of the English adolescents, included only the United States as their image of America (see Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). Ten percent of the Sacramento pupils and 5 percent of those at Nottingham perceived America as consisting of just North America. About one-fifth of the maps of both groups could not be classified in any of the above categories (see Figure 10).

When asked to include ten place names on their maps, both groups frequently included California, Texas, Florida, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Mexico, and Canada. Other place names mentioned by the English group included New York, Washington D.C., Virginia, Las Vegas, and North and South America. The Sacramento group, on the other hand, included their hometown, Oregon, Washington, Maine, Nevada, Alaska, Hawaii, and the Pacific Ocean. Both groups selected place names located

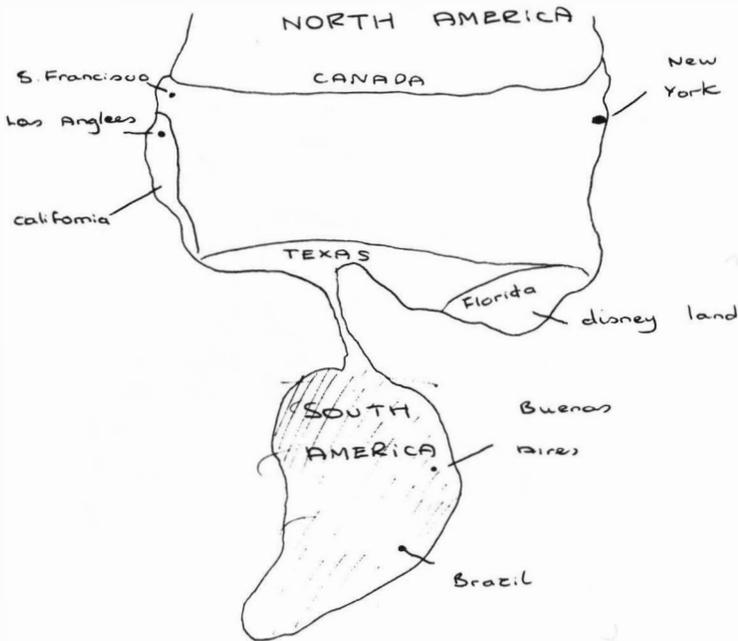


Figure 1. Gary's view of America from Nottingham.



Figure 2. Nigel's view of America from Nottingham

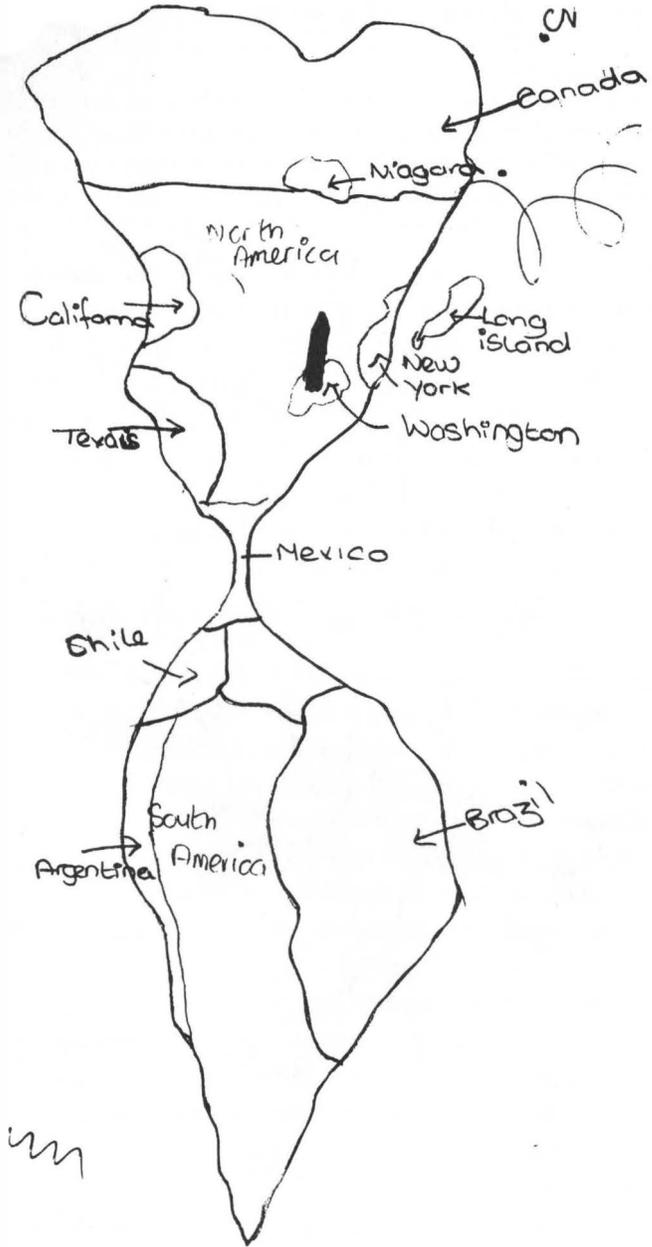


Figure 3. Tracey's view of America from Nottingham.

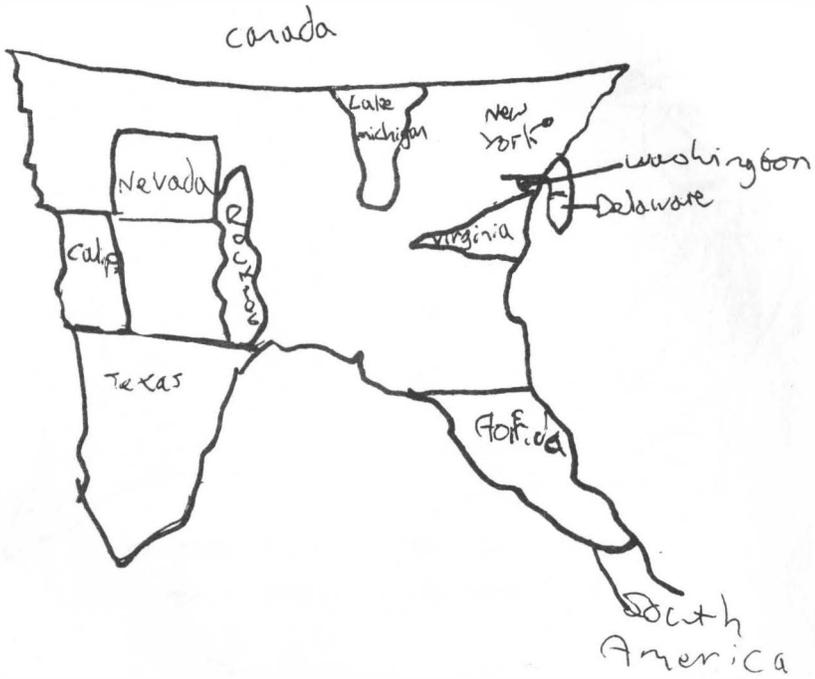


Figure 4. Howard's view of America from Nottingham.

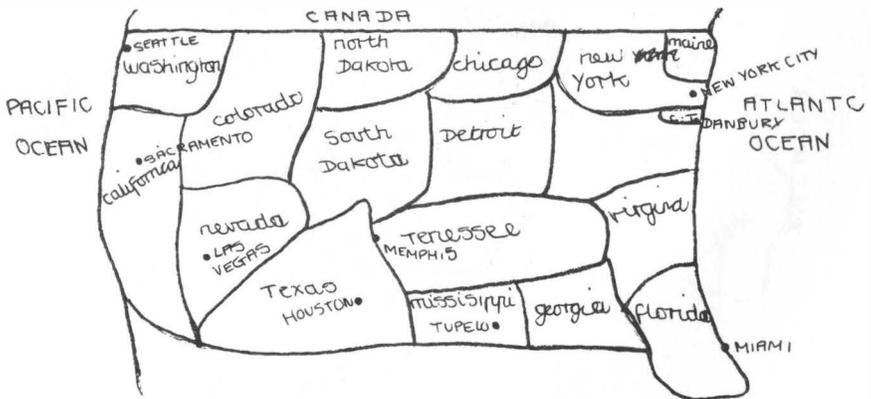


Figure 5. Joanne's view of America from Nottingham.

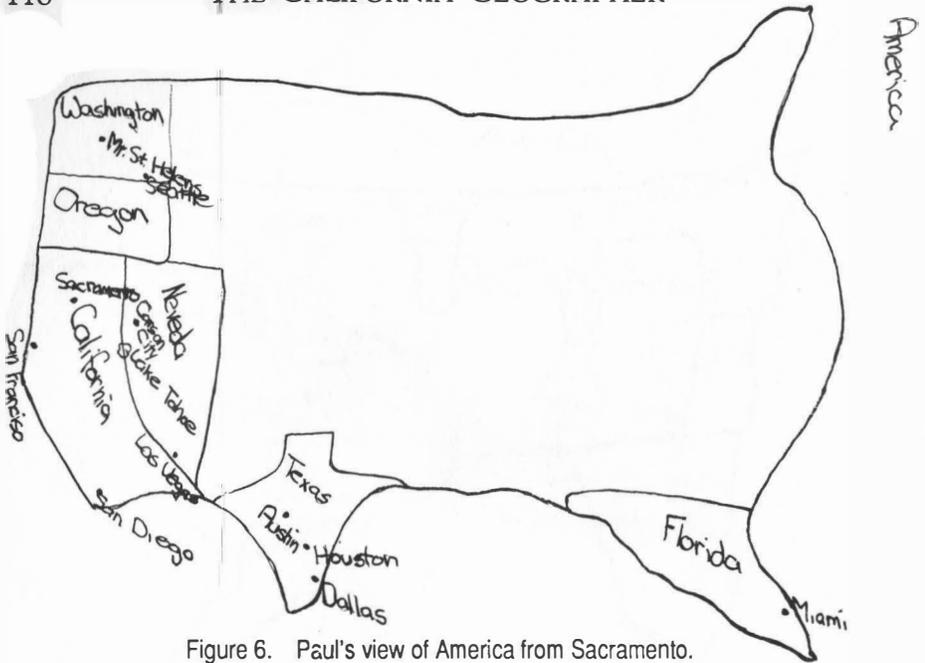


Figure 6. Paul's view of America from Sacramento.



Figure 7. Larry's view of America from Sacramento.

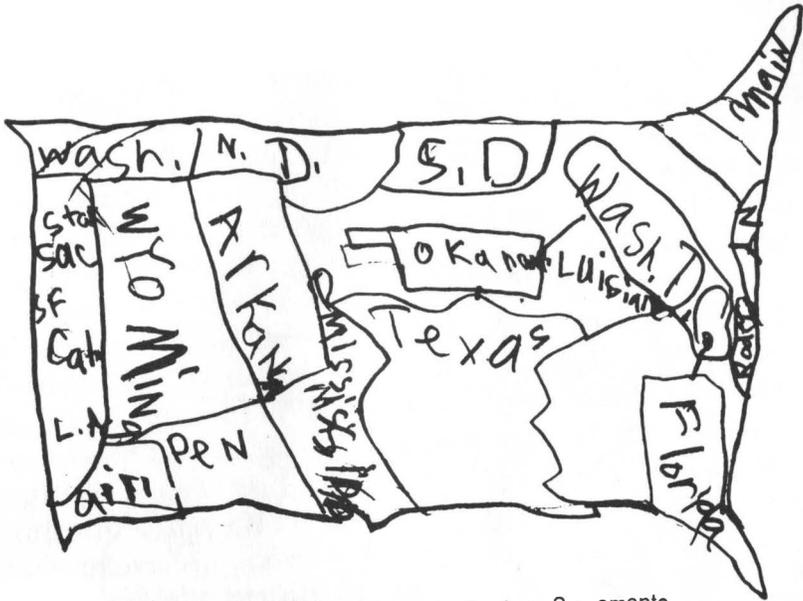


Figure 8. Tony's view of America from Sacramento.



Figure 9. Chanel's view of America from Sacramento.



Figure 10. Yeong's view of America from Sacramento.

adjacent or near the coastline, with the American group showing locations principally in the Far West.

We suggest that at least two general conclusions can be drawn from this survey. First, the results of massive doses of "Miami Vice," "Charlie's Angels," and "Bonanza" are quite evident; that is, the media are not accurately portraying American life and culture to our friends abroad. It is readily apparent that the typical English student's exaggerated view of American violence and materialism, as well as his or her belief that Americans have a compulsion for the biggest, the most, and the best are perceptions molded by the media.¹ The British students do not seem to realize that life in typical American communities, such as Twin Falls, Scottsbluff, and Peoria, is radically different from what they are used to seeing on their television screens.

Second, the results of the survey reflect upon the need to improve the quality of geographic training in many American schools. In general, British children are more aware of landscapes and able to verbalize about them at a younger age than are American students, who come from a tradition in which geographic skills have seldom been considered part of the basics at either the elementary or secondary levels. This conclusion is supported by recent studies which demonstrate that geographical illiteracy occurs even at the university level.² It is remarkable that numerous English adolescents were able to place California on the west side of the North American continent on a map drawn from memory, while 42 percent of a beginning geography class at the University of Miami could not locate London on a commercially prepared world base map.³ One of the more perceptive American students summed up the problem rather nicely when she stated: "Americans aren't taught enough about other countries." Perhaps she should have included her own country as well.

NOTES

1. Generally, these perceptions confirm the stereotypes set forth by David Lowenthal in "The American Scene," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 58 (1968), pp. 61-88.
2. Gilbert M. Grosvenor, "Geographic Ignorance: Time for a Turn-about," *National Geographic*, Vol. 167, No. 6 (1985), p. iv; David M. Helgren, "Place Name Ignorance Is National News," *Journal of Geography*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1983), pp. 176-178.
3. Helgren, *Ibid.*