

Crossing the Cultural Divide: Great Britain

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There'll always be an England... It's a popular sentiment, also the title of a well-known song, but what many Americans don't realize is that the English still feel the U.S. is part of their cultural legacy. They are, in fact, right. More than anything, American culture evolved from the colonial seeds of Jamestown, VA and Plymouth, MA.

And later, when the Founding Fathers drafted the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, they wrote as critics of – and practitioners of – British parliamentary law.

After the War of 1812, once both countries realized they'd have to deal with each other as "global" equals, trade between England and America quickly surpassed what it had been before the Revolution. Between 1830 and 1890, over two million Brits emigrated to America (to say nothing of 3.5 million Irish immigrants).

More recently, when American soldiers assembled in England in World War II, Churchill said that, once again, "the British Empire and the United States are somewhat mixed up together."

"Approximate English"

Beyond the shared history, culture and bloodlines, it's also a question of language. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Steinbeck did more for the "English novel" in the 20th century than anyone from Britain.

Businessmen from the U.S. and the U.K. have a worldwide reputation for being unilingual. It's as if both have reached the same conclusion: English is today's international language – be it in the U.N. or on CNN – so why struggle?

The equation is also pragmatic. When dealing with people who speak English as a second language, even if they're fluent, you have a distinct psychological (and tactical) advantage. British and American culture coincide here as well, in that both are more comfortable dealing from a position of strength and making no bones about it. But each speaks a different language all the same and, when dealing with people in the U.K., Americans are well advised to choose their words with care.

The U.S. is a mishmash of ethnicities and each has brought a dimension to the way English is spoken in America. The language would have evolved in any case, given nearly four centuries on a new continent. The result, however, is that Americans speak what I like to call "approximate English."

A friend was nominated for an international fellowship a few years ago by a fairly well-known publisher. He is from Boston and has two university degrees, but when he thanked his British benefactor for “sponsoring” him, the other raised his eyebrows and said, “I’ve suggested your name; I’ve not pledged funds.”

Americans speak in synonyms. “Sponsor,” “nominate,” “recommend,” “propose,” “underwrite” and so on somehow seem more or less the same. But, in British ears, each word has a specific meaning.

Slow Down, Americans

The first rule for doing business in Britain is to listen carefully and say precisely what you mean in response. Returning to the notion of shared culture, England sees America today as the most successful “empire” in the history of the world – this from a people on whose territories “the sun never set” half a century ago. Most Brits have honestly mixed feelings toward the U.S., a combination of pride and jealousy on the part of the father, as it were, who regards the son who’s surpassed him. America is sexier, richer, more modern, “bigger-and-better.”

French citizens will try to refute the obvious picture, Germans to find flaws in the design, Italians will ridicule the whole idea. The English, on the other hand, admit to themselves (if not to their American “cousins”) that it’s all too true. They take a glance back to England’s glorious past, which will never be again, and sigh. And they look for an opportunity to poke fun at Yanks.

Brits like to say Americans have no culture, no sense of history – that Americans lack maturity, are impatient, boast too much and “talk too loud.” This last bit will be pronounced in a decidedly American accent, the joke being that “loud” is supposed to be an adverb.

In reality, all they’re asking is for the American in England to slow down and avoid condescension. Social grace and correct speech will go a long way in the U.K. After all, Americans do have culture and, the English admit, a modicum of history. The last two centuries have been nearly flawless. “Tremendous good luck!” a witty Londoner would say with a smirk. The future, however, is – for now at least – firmly in American hands.

Business Booming

The U.S. and the U.K. do about \$200 billion of trade together every year and, surprisingly, it’s an almost even split. Since the Thatcher-Reagan ‘80s, British business attitudes and practices have changed drastically, becoming much closer to the American way of operating.

Young bucks have replaced the old boys and women have taken their place in the corporate world too, albeit to a lesser extent than in America. Also, Britain has truly evolved into a multi-ethnic society in the past 40 years. The old class differences linger but are fast disappearing.

At the same time, proper manners remain as important as they ever were. Americans who shake hands from the shoulder, clap business partners on the back and use first names before being invited to do so come across as bumpkins.

Chip Off The Old Block

In other matters, Yanks and Brits remain “the closest of foreigners” (to quote the novelist Dan MacLeod). Both expect a lot of facts and figures at meetings; both see scientific evidence as truth, the empiric method as proof. Neither has much patience for the Mediterranean art of bluster-and-barter. Then again, the Germanic approach of nothing but facts and figures is considered boring, pedantic.

Americans and Brits share a great love for humor and meetings should be entertaining as well as informative. However, like the difference in their use of the English language, the American “gutbuster of a joke” will leave an English audience cold. British humor is based on irony, wry observation, a surprising twist at the end of an anecdote: to wit, wit.

Tough And Stubborn, But...

For all of their self-confidence, the British are self-conscious. Most of their humor is self-directed, like the fat man who jokes about his weight. Yet, as Hitler found out during the Battle of Britain, the English are among the toughest, most stubborn people on Earth. It’s not a good idea to make fun of them, or their anachronistic monarchy or, in fact, anything intimate to them. They’ll become extremely defensive. Like the fat man, who has quite a high opinion of himself even though he jokes about his weight.

Virtually every ethnic group on the planet believes intrinsically in its own superiority. The English used to run half the planet (and Sir Francis Drake was the first to circumnavigate it). Whether English, Scottish or Welsh, the British insist on seeing themselves as Europeans by accident of geography only. And they tend to regard other countries (including the U.S.) as, at best, failed attempts to achieve the level of British culture. But if you show them respect, that respect will immediately be mutual.