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A report consistently brought back by visitors to the US is how friendly, courteous, and helpful most Americans were to them. To be fair, this observation is also frequently made of Canada and Canadians, and should best be considered North American. There are, of course, exceptions. Small-minded officials, rude waiters, and ill-mannered taxi drivers are hardly unknown in the US. Yet it is an observation made so frequently that it deserves comment. For a long period of time and in many parts of the country, a traveler was a welcome break in an otherwise dull existence. Dullness and loneliness were common problems of the families who generally lived distant from one another. Strangers and travelers were welcome sources of diversion, and brought news of the outside world. The harsh realities of the frontier also shaped this tradition of hospitality. Someone traveling alone, if hungry, injured, or ill, often had nowhere to turn except to the nearest cabin or settlement. It was not a matter of choice for the traveler or merely a charitable impulse on the part of the settlers. It reflected the harshness of daily life: if you didnt take in the stranger and take care of him, there was no one else who would. And someday, remember, you might be in the same situation. Today there are many charitable organizations which specialize in helping the weary traveler. Yet, the old tradition of hospitality to strangers is still very strong in the US, especially in the smaller cities and towns

away from the busy tourist trails. "I was just traveling through, got talking with this American, and pretty soon he invited me home for dinner amazing." Such observations reported by visitors to the US are not uncommon, but are not always understood properly. The casual friendliness of many Americans should be interpreted neither as superficial nor as artificial, but as the result of a historically developed cultural tradition. As is true of any developed society, in America a complex set of cultural signals, assumptions, and conventions underlies all social interrelationships. And, of course, speaking a language does not necessarily mean that someone understands social and cultural patterns. Visitors who fail to "translate" cultural meanings properly often draw wrong conclusions. For example, when an American uses the word "friend", the cultural implications of the word may be quite different from those it has in the visitors language and culture. It takes more than a brief encounter on a bus to distinguish between courteous convention and individual interest. Yet, being friendly is a virtue that many Americans value highly and expect from both neighbors and strangers.

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