America Is Different

By FRIEDRICH G. K. GROHE

IN THE VERY BEGINNING of my stay in the United States I learned to appreciate a significant and sympathetic quality of most Americans — the wish to be nice and helpful to the newcomer.

When I entered an office, I was usually welcomed with the encouraging question: “Can I help you?” This struck me as not merely an empty phrase but rather a sincere query. I enjoyed the complete absence of the authoritarian tone that is found so frequently in Germany.

I was also struck by the way of announcing decrees and prohibitions which showed that American authorities saw their citizens as individuals rather than as subjects. The famous German word “verboten” (forbidden) was mostly replaced by “please,” and a polite “thank you” was seldom forgotten at the end of an order.

I had been informed that the Midwest was very conservative in its political ideas and the center of American isolationism. Therefore, I was greatly surprised to meet again and again so many people and groups all over Michigan who had developed a great interest in international affairs and who were eager to get better acquainted with the problems, customs and cultures of the nations abroad.

Although many Americans view the German nation as a whole with some skepticism or at least reserve, there was scarcely any resentment against the individual German provided he showed some tact and tolerance in human relationships. It was therefore not difficult to develop personal contact with many American students as well as with people outside the college.

A SOURCE OF GREAT surprise was the small amount of “academic freedom” which the American student enjoys. As a European, I was not accustomed to the control of class attendance, the difficulties involved in attending other classes as a casual visitor, the daily homework and the frequent examinations.

Gradually I learned to understand that all this was a natural result of the difference of the American conception of higher education from our traditional German one.

The American colleges want to give higher education to as many people as possible, which necessarily means a certain lowering of the scientific level. This also explains the great amount of guidance and supervision, I may even say control, to which the American student is subject.

In Germany, however, only a comparatively few and selected people who are mature and talented enough to work independently are supposed to receive higher education.

Of course, the scientific standing of the graduate schools of some of the top-ranking American universities and colleges satisfy the highest expectations students from any country may have.

I should like to point out that these remarks should not be considered as an evaluation. I think that the American system of mass education with its tremendous varieties of opportunities for studies meets the requirements of the country very well. Whether or not it could successfully be introduced in a country like Germany with such different conditions seems somewhat doubtful to me.

In discussions the idea was often advanced that a more or less exact copy of the American system of education should be established in Germany in order to guarantee a democratic development.

However, I think it is false to believe one need only copy the outward form of an institution to automatically achieve the same spiritual results. It seems far better to try to understand the spirit and then to find suitable forms, adapted to the particular local conditions, which might produce the same spiritual results. I mention this because so many Americans told me that we Germans should just copy American institutions and then everything would be all right.

FROM THE BEGINNING, I had a strong desire to know the United States as it really is and to get as comprehensive an impression as possible of the various parts of the country and of the people. At the same time, as an engineer, I was greatly interested in a number of giant American engineering projects.

The Christmas vacation offered a welcomed opportunity to realize some of my plans. After careful planning I decided to go first to Knoxville, Tenn., to visit the Tennessee Valley Authority and then to proceed further south to Miami. As my funds were limited I planned to hitchhike, feeling that it was not only the cheapest means of transportation but the most educational way of traveling and of meeting different types of people.

On all my trips I was never faced with any formal difficulties in traveling. In every respect the foreigner enjoys just as much freedom as the American citizen.

I left Michigan equipped with many road maps and an AAA tour book and hitchhiked through Fort Wayne, Ind.; Cincinnati, O.; and Lexington, Ky., to Knoxville. In southern Kentucky, a section of the highway was closed and I had to use a long detour that took me high up into the mountains. Thus I passed through a typical “hillbilly” region with all its poverty, dirt and, as it appeared to me, depravity.

Only two days later, when I went up to Fontana Dam, I passed through a similar region. But there, in between the old, ruined huts, new, clean and 

This article is the condensed version of a report prepared by Friedrich G. K. Grohe upon his return to Germany after attending the Graduate School of Michigan State College, East Lansing, Mich., as an exchange student. Grohe, who studied engineering and passed his examination for his Master of Science degree with distinction, was in the United States from September 1948 to December 1949.
nice-looking homes were being constructed. New life and civilization were obviously entering this backward land—a striking example of the success of TVA.

I stayed in Knoxville for four days and was received in the headquarters of TVA with extraordinary courtesy and kindness. A program was arranged and conducted for me and guides were provided to take me around Fontana Dam, Loudoun Dam and Norris Dam. I also had ample opportunity to talk to engineers about particular technical problems.

On MY WAY through North Carolina, I made a friend who invited me to spend the Christmas holidays with his parents in Asheville. I had an unexpectedly nice time among kind people and then continued my trip through Augusta, Ga., to Savannah, Ga.

In these two cities, I got my first realistic impression of the Negro problem in the South. I was shocked at the Negro sections which looked so unworthy of human beings. I constantly had to keep in mind what the Nazis had done with the Jews and their political enemies. Here, at least, nobody was persecuted or killed.

When I stood on the highway in the Negro section of Augusta trying to get my next ride I felt strange in being the only white man on the street in a vicinity that could just as well be a part of darkest Africa. It was a feeling of being in a hopeless minority. At that moment I could understand, although not approve, some of the attitudes white people have developed in regions largely populated by Negroes.

It was, of course, ignorance which produced this strange feeling, and I saw the trend which leads from ignorance to prejudice, from imaginary necessity for self-defense to "preventive" aggression. Later, after I became personally acquainted with some fine Negroes and learned that they are human beings, too, differing very little from me in their mentality and reactions, I lost my feeling of strangeness with them.

I was disappointed by Savannah, which was described in my guide book as "one of the most beautiful and historic cities in the South." I think it was the dirtiest city I saw in the United States. When I walked down Montgomery Street, in the middle of the Negro section, I saw a dead dog in a state of decay lying on the curb. Large cars sped by on their way to Florida, but nobody troubled to remove the dog.

In both Savannah and Charleston, S.C., I could not lose the impression that I was "buried alive" in a dead city. The old part of those cities, which may be historic to Americans, cannot give Europeans the true impression of an old culture which in the old countries of Europe is so inseparably connected with historic places. After these cities it was refreshing to see new life and progress in Jacksonville, Fla.

I also spent some very enjoyable hours in the old town of St. Augustine. There I found some of the true culture I had missed in Savannah. Miami with all its wealth impressed me very much, as did the beauty of the Venetian Islands, the cultivated homes embedded in blooming, evergreen gardens, and the beach of the Atlantic Ocean.

Back at college, I became a member of the International Club at Michigan State. More than 250 foreign students from more than 50 different countries were attending the college. I consider my close contacts with numerous foreigners as one of the most valuable

While in Michigan, Friedrich Grohe, with students from other nations, took part in a radio roundtable (above). Since returning to Germany he has given nine lectures, at which he showed pictures and slides from among hundreds he brought back. The 27-year-old student remarks on a freer spirit of inquiry among Germans than there was when he left in 1948.
experiences I had in the United States. Never before in my life had I had the opportunity to talk to people from China, India, Iraq and South America, for instance, and to learn firsthand about their culture, economic and political background.

Of special importance, however, was the meeting with Jews and citizens of those European countries that were occupied by the German army during the war. Although I never approved of, or excused, the horrible crimes committed by the Nazi regime, I was no friend to the conception of collective German guilt.

But here, facing those who had been directly or indirectly discriminated against and persecuted by the Germans, I recognized the full extent of those crimes more clearly than ever before and I could not help having a personal feeling of guilt — or, at least, a truly deep feeling of shame.

The atmosphere of good will and understanding which prevailed in the college was particularly beneficial for social intercourse with those people who had suffered under the Nazis and who had every reason to hate the Germans. Hostilities were avoided and in most cases we could find a common basis of understanding. In the course of time some of the Norwegians, Frenchmen and Netherlands were among the best friends I made in the United States. In Europe, under less fortunate external conditions, this might not have been achieved.

COLLEGE LIFE with its variety of student activities was full of fun as well as work. I particularly remember the annual "Pullcar Race" as it was striking example to me of the liberal atmosphere existing between the people and government officials.

At the invitation of the students, the governor of the state of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams, acted as starter in some of the races. It was wonderful to see how the youthful governor made humorous speeches to the crowd of students and participated in every kind of fun.

Although the funniest car built by the students was actually a parody on "Soapy Williams" (the governor's nickname), he did not resent it in the least. I could scarcely imagine how a German minister-president would have behaved in the same situation.

Along with other foreign students I had the opportunity to visit some small country schools, farms and a dairy in Clinton County, Mich. At night we were guests at Farm Bureau meetings in St. Johns, where we lectured on our respective countries.

Again and again I was surprised at the interest in foreign countries showed by the "man in the street" and by school children. It was of particular significance to me that in each discussion in which I participated many people asked questions and stated their opinions frankly.

This is in pronounced contrast to the behavior of most Germans, who feel restrictions against speaking their thoughts in public. This is particularly true among German young people. In Germany, the youngsters are afraid they may appear ridiculous in the eyes of the older people present. This is, of course, chiefly due to a defect in the German educational system.

In some respects the German educational system seems to me to be superior to the American system, particularly as far as scientific standing is concerned, but Germans do not put enough emphasis on "education for life." Among American students I often found an astonishing ignorance in the field of general education, ignorance of history, geography, literature, languages, etc. — subjects which are considered very important in German higher education.

Many a freshman or sophomore in college was not even too well acquainted with his mother tongue, and I, a foreigner, was sometimes asked by my American roommates how to spell common English words. But the vast majority of all these people had a well developed personality. They were going to be good citizens and were not restricted by worn-out conventions.

My trip to Florida showed me large sections of the country. However, I felt that my experience would not be complete without having seen and studied the western states. Hence I decided to interrupt my studies and take the regular summer vacation. Having received a scholarship for an International Service Seminar sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee to be held at Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Ore., I planned to combine extended trips through the northwestern, western and southwestern states.

I HITCHHIKED FROM East Lansing to Chicago, where I stayed for two and a half days. I found this city very interesting and very American. It was the only place in which I found wealth and poverty, beauty and ugliness in such close proximity. It was fascinating and depressing.

There was the splendid business section — and only a few blocks further I found myself in the middle of a slum area which looked worse to me than anything I had seen before with the exception of some Negro sections in the South.

There was one thing which disturbed me more than the unpleasant view of the miserable houses as it seemed to express a discriminatory attitude toward the poorer part of the population. While the streets were kept in excellent condition in the business and wealthy residential sections, the city administration apparently did not take much care of public property in the slum area.

Dirty streets and broken road surfaces contributed considerably to the depressing atmosphere. Certainly Chicago is not the only city in the world where this can be observed, but in no other place have I found the contrasts and extremes so pronounced.

All this made Chicago appear to me in a kind of demoniacal light — very "American," as Europeans are in-
clined to say. But it seemed to me that this less fortunate type of "Americanism" already belongs to the past and that we merely find here the remainders of former epochs which are no longer the dominating forces in this country.

Hitchhiking to Portland, via the Grand Coulee Dam, Denver, Colo., Salt Lake City, Utah, and Spokane, Wash., I got a good impression of the enormous distances and the vast "living space" in this country. It has always seemed to me that these tremendous dimensions have made a decisive contribution to the development of the American character, the way of living and the form of democracy that has been established in the United States. No wonder Americans are used to thinking and working on a large scale.

UPON LEAVING SPOKANE, I experienced a striking example of the liberal and individual ways in which laws are applied. I was not aware that hitchhiking was prohibited by law in the state of Washington. Hence I was stopped by the state police. After I had shown my identification, however, and a letter from the president of Michigan State College, the state police not only let me continue on my way but even advised me where I could best catch a ride.

This would scarcely have been possible in Germany, where the letter of the law usually plays a more important role than its reasonable interpretation. In the US, however, I found repeatedly that certain laws were not enforced, if, in that particular case, no actual offense or crime was intended.

Undoubtedly, the seminar belonged to the most valuable experiences I had in the United States. For seven weeks a group of 29 students from 14 countries lived, worked and studied together under almost ideal conditions.

When we students arrived at Lewis and Clark College, we were asked to get together and run the seminar ourselves according to democratic principles.

We decided the entire program—at what time we wanted to get up, meal hours, number of lectures and recreation time. We decided our own topics of discussion, set up daily working schedules for kitchen help, dishwashing and cleaning the rooms and edited and published our own newspaper twice a week.

Of course, under this system of almost complete freedom, everything did not go smoothly. We made a number of mistakes which had to be corrected later. But these very difficulties gave us a useful lesson in democracy and we learned to understand some of the trouble the United Nations has from time to time. It would have been more convenient, in some respects, had we been told by experienced people what to do. But democracy is never convenient and we saw the great benefit of learning by our own mistakes.

IN OUR DISCUSSIONS the foreign policy of some Western nations was subjected to critical review. We saw the appearance of some imperialistic trends in the American economic policy in the Middle East as well as in South America. We all agreed that the world situation could be improved if the Western democracies, including the United States, at least would not only practice their democratic principles in domestic affairs but extend the adoption of those measures of freedom, justice and human rights to their foreign policy in their spheres of influence.

At the end of the seminar I was invited to accompany a friend of mine in his car on a vacation trip to the Grand Canyon. On the way we took a look at the University of California at Berkeley and while the sun was setting we drove across the Oakland Bay bridge into San Francisco.

It was one of the few moments in life one never forgets. Behind us lay Berkeley, Oakland and Alameda, gilded by the last rays of the setting sun. Before us, tens of thousands of lights were appearing in San Francisco. About us, thousands of cars rushed across the magnificent bridge, the cables of which shone like pure gold in the evening sun. Indeed an impressive demonstration of human ability embellished by nature.

SAN FRANCISCO was the American city that impressed me by far the most. The steep hills, the cable cars, the big suspension bridges. Chinatown, the Golden Gate, the Pacific coast, the California style dominating the architecture of the residential sections—all contributed to the particular and unique atmosphere.

In Beverly Hills I found for the first and only time in the United States something approaching class-consciousness. We stopped to ask a gardener working on the street where some of the movie stars lived and inquired who was living in the large house to our left. The gardener replied: "Oh, that is nobody, he just has money!"

I deeply appreciated the almost complete lack of class distinction in America among the white people. The way
in which the boss usually treats his workers, the informal, unauthoritative tone prevailing in the relations between employer and employee while mutual respect is maintained, and the equality in social life are typical and worthy of imitation.

Leaving my comrade at Flagstaff, Ariz., I began hitchhiking back to Michigan State College. Proceeding through Texas to New Orleans, I was again struck by the mentality of the people in the South and their outlook on life, which is very different from that in all other parts of the country.

The restless activity, the incessant striving after progress, so significant for the United States, seemed to be much less pronounced in the South. Talking to people I found the following philosophy: "I just work as much as I must to maintain my present standard of living." It would be an interesting study to try to determine the relative influence of inheritance, environment and climate as possible causes for such differences.

I liked the sprawling city of Washington, D.C., with its many representative buildings and monuments. Of particular interest, of course, was the Capitol. I was fortunate enough to listen to a Senate session for a while. In an excellent speech, the Republican Senator Knowland of California attacked the American foreign policy in China. Although the opinions were very much divided, the discussion was fair and sportsmanlike. Occasional humorous remarks — the strong side of most Americans — prevented any kind of "bestial seriousness" (German expression) such as is frequently found in German political life.

My last term at Michigan State College was chiefly devoted to my studies and when my departure time came it certainly was not easy to say goodbye to the many friends I had made in East Lansing and to the friendly campus that had become my second home.

THERE IS NO DOUBT that the exchange of persons is one of the most effective means of establishing friendly relations between Germany and the United States. Germany has given a striking example in the past how separation from the outside world can breed intolerance, overestimation of one's own abilities, and receptiveness to wicked propaganda.

The sphere of influence of a single exchange person may be rather small when he returns to his country. However, if we succeed in increasing the exchange of persons of good will so that these single spheres add up to a considerable power, the attitude of a whole nation might be influenced in a positive way. This seems particularly important for a country like Germany, which is in a state of transition and hence fairly susceptible.

In contrast to a trip to the United States, books, movies and the presence of occupation troops are only incomplete means for obtaining a true picture of America. The personal impression which I received in the United States far surpassed anything I could have imagined from my experience in Europe.

The "Hollywood version" of the United States produced by American movies and dominating the minds of the common people in Europe is, unfortunately, not the best propaganda for the United States.

This is a real pity. America is so very much better than one could imagine from her movies.

Nor does the presence of the Occupation Forces in Germany give Germans a firsthand picture of America. Unavoidable psychological difficulties in the relationship between victor and an occupied people render a closer contact between Germans and Americans on an equal basis rather difficult.

Moreover, the large part of the population of America — America's backbone, in the best sense of the word — is scarcely represented in the occupation force. I am thinking particularly of the low-income and middle classes, the workers, farmers, employees and the small businessmen. There are a small number of highly-educated and, very often, high-minded officials in Germany, but, it seems to me, that the mass of the common soldiers with their families is somewhat below the American standard.

It must be acknowledged that with their exchange program, Americans have started an undertaking that has no precedent in history in the relations between a victorious and a defeated people. The positive results, I am sure, will make up for all the trouble in surmounting the many difficulties and obstacles connected with such undertaking.

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Soviets Delay Repatriation

welcomed by the Government of the United States, which would be willing to co-operate in any appropriate way.

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The British and French Embassies also have communicated with the Soviet Government on this subject.

As is well-known, the continued detention of German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union has been a matter of concern to the United States Government and to the Governments of the United Kingdom and France for a considerable period. The foreign ministers of the United States, the United Kingdom and France issued a statement at London on May 12 with respect to this subject which stated that the foreign ministers had agreed to take all possible steps to obtain information bearing on the fate of prisoners of war and civilians not yet repatriated from the Soviet Union and to bring about repatriation in the largest possible number of cases.

Korea-War Fears Swell Desertions

A marked increase in the number of deserters from Soviet Sector "people's police" units in the first week of July was ascribed by Berlin Element Public Safety Division to "fear of being sent to Korea." Thirty-five "people's police" — more than half the number reported deserted in the entire month of June — sought asylum in the Western Sectors in the week ended July 7.