One of the generalities most often noted about Americans is that we are a restless, a dissatisfied, a searching people. We bridle and buck under failure, and we go mad with dissatisfaction in the face of success. We spend our time searching for security, and hate it when we get it. For the most part we are an intemperate people: we eat too much when we can, drink too much, indulge our senses too much, Even in our so-called virtues we are intem-perate: a teetotaler is not content not to drink--he must stop all the drinking in the world; a vegetarian among us would outlaw the eating of meat. We work too hard, and many die under the strain; and then to make up for that we play with a violence as suicidal.

**One of the things about Americans is that we never relax. We hate failure. We are upset when we are not successful. We want security. We can’t make decisions. We love excess. We eat too much food. We drink to much liquor. We pay too much attention to how we feel. We either love excess or nothing. If we don’t eat meat, we try to tell everyone else to not eat meat. If we do not drink alcohol, we try out make alcohol illegal. We work too hard, and may die because of the stress.**

The result is that we seem to be in a state of turmoil all the time, both physically and mentally. We are able to believe that our government is weak, stupid, overbearing, dishonest, and inefficient, and at the same time we are deeply convinced that it is the best government in the world, and we would like to impose it upon everyone else. We speak of the *American Way of Life* as though it involved the ground rules for the governance of heaven. A man hungry and unemployed through his own stupidity and that of others, a man beaten by a brutal policeman, a woman forced into prostitution by her own laziness, high prices, availability, and despair--all bow with reverence toward the *American Way of Life*, although each one would look puzzled and angry if he were asked to define it. We scramble and scrabble up the stony path toward the pot of gold we have taken to mean security. We trample friends, relatives, and strangers who get in the way of our achieving it, and once we get it we shower it on psychoanalysts to try to find out why we are unhappy, and finally, if we have enough of the gold we contribute it back to the nation in the form of foundations and charities.

**Americans are constantly in chaos. We think our government is stupid and dishonest, but we also think it is the best government in the world. We think everyone should have a government like ours. We disregard others who are struggling and believe they are lazy. We constantly want money and we will step on anyone who gets in the way of us getting our money. But, once we have our money, we wonder why we are not happy.**

We fight our way in, and try to buy our way out. We are alert, curious, hopeful, and we take more drugs designed to make us unaware than any other people. We are self-reliant and at the same time completely dependent. We are aggressive, and defenseless. Americans overindulge their children; the children in turn are overly dependent on their parents. We are complacent in our possessions, in our houses, in our education; but it is hard to find a man or woman who does not want something better for the next generation. Americans are remarkably kind and hospitable and open with both guests and strangers; and yet they will make a wide circle around the man dying on the pavement. Fortunes are spent getting cats out of trees and dogs out of sewer pipes; but a girl screaming for help in the street draws only slammed doors, closed windows, and silence.

**We try to buy our way out of everything. We are a curious and hopeful people who take way more drugs than necessary. We want to rely only on ourselves but need other people at times. We can be both aggressive and weak. We spoil our children and then wonder why they cannot be independent. We don’t the present, but we care about the future. We are welcoming to guests and strangers but will pass by a man dying on the street. We will spend a lot of money on getting our pets out of trees and sewers, but we refuse to help a girl screaming in the street.**

Now there is a set of generalities for you, each one of them canceled out by another generality. Americans seem to live and breathe and function by paradox; but in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths. We truly believe ourselves to be natural-born mechanics and do-it-yourselfers. We spend our lives in automobiles, yet most of us--a great many of us at least-do not know enough about a car to look in the gas tank when the engine fails. Our lives as we live them would not function without electricity, but it is a rare man or woman who, when the power goes off, knows how to look for a burned-out fuse and replace it. We believe implicitly that we are the heirs of the pioneers; that we have inherited self-sufficiency and the ability to take care of ourselves, particularly in relation to nature. There isn't a man among us in ten thousand who knows how to butcher a cow or a pig and cut it up for eating, let alone a wild animal. By natural endowment, we are great rifle shots and great hunters--but when hunting season opens there is a slaughter of farm animals and humans by men and women who couldn't hit a real target if they could see it. Americans treasure the knowledge that they live close to nature, but fewer and fewer farmers feed more and more people; and as soon as we can afford to we eat out of cans, buy microwave dinners, and haunt the delicatessens. Affluence means moving to the suburbs, but the American suburbanite sees, if anything, less of the country than the city apartment dweller with his window boxes and his African violets carefully tended under lights. In no country are more seeds and plants and equipment purchased, and less vegetables and flowers raised.

**We think we can fix anything. We spend our lives in cars but when our car breaks, we don’t know how to fix the car. We think we are independent and can take care of ourselves. But we do not know how to kill and prepare an animal for food. We say we care about nature and land, but it is rare to see a farmer feed more people. Instead, he feeds less. We want to buy microwave dinners and cans of beans. When you have money, you move out of the city to the suburbs. But just because we moved, doesn’t mean we are closer to nature. We spend money on seeds and equipment but raise less vegetables and flowers.**

The paradoxes are everywhere: We shout that we are a nation of laws, not men-and then proceed to break every law we can if we can get away with it. We proudly insist that we base our political positions on the issues--and we will vote against a man because of his religion, his name, or the shape of his nose.

**The paradox is everywhere. We are proud of our rules and laws but try to break every law we can if we can get away with it. We are say we vote for someone based on their position on a topic. But instead we vote against them because of their religion or the shape of their nose.**

(7) We fancy ourselves as hardheaded realists, but we will buy anything we see advertised, particularly on television; and we buy it not with reference to the quality or the value of the product, but directly as a result of the number of times we have heard it mentioned. The most arrant nonsense about a product is never questioned. We are afraid to be awake, afraid to be alone, afraid to be a moment without the noise and confusion we call entertainment. We boast of our dislike of highbrow art and music, and we have more and better attended symphonies, art galleries, and theaters than any country in the world. We detest abstract art and produce more of it than all the rest of the world put together.

**We think we are real and “down-to-earth” but we will buy anything we see in TV commercials. We don’t buy things based on quality. We buy things based on how many times we have heard a product advertised. We are afraid to be awake, afraid to be alone, we are afraid of silence.**

One of the characteristics most puzzling to a foreign observer is the strong and imperish-able dream the American carries. On inspection, it is found that the dream has little to do with reality in American life. Consider the dream of and the hunger for home. The very word can reduce nearly all of my compatriots to tears. Builders and developers never build houses--they build homes. The dream home is either in a small town or in a suburban area where grass and trees simulate the country. This dream home is a permanent seat, not rented but owned. It is a center where a man and his wife grow graciously old, warmed by the radiance of well-washed children and grandchildren. Many thousands of these homes are built every year; built, planted, advertised, and sold-and yet, the American family rarely stays in one place for more than five years. The home and its equipment are purchased on time and are heavily mortgaged. The earning power of the father is almost always over-extended. If the earner is successful and his income increases. Right away the house is not big enough, or in the proper neighborhood. Or perhaps suburban life pails, and the family moves to the city, where excitement and convenience beckon.

**One quality of Americans that is the most confusing to foreigners is the insuppressible dream that the American carries. The American Dream has little to do with the reality of American life. One part of the American dream is to own a home. People build houses either in towns or cities. They want their home to be permanent, not rented. They want their home to be a place where their children can grow up and a place where they can grow old. These homes are built every year, yet an American family never stays in one place for longer than 5 years. Instead of owning a home, we own money to a bank. As soon as Americans start to make more money, they buy a new home in a more expensive neighborhood.**