

# The prettier ugly Americans

## Europe's new Vandals come from our colleges

By George Lesser

<http://washingtontimes.com/news/2009/mar/05/the-prettier-ugly-americans/>

Thursday, March 5, 2009

OP-ED:

FLORENCE, Italy.

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The legendary “ugly American” is getting a new lease on life from a new generation of Americans descending on European cities and towns like the barbarian invaders of old.

These young people actually damage American foreign policy. They reinforce the perception - spread widely during the last eight years - that an undisciplined American society produces people who are generally irresponsible and disorderly and frequently dangerous to themselves and others.

A little bar claiming to be an English pub is nestled in a narrow, ancient back street lined with workshops with small apartments above. In the bar, most evenings, young, college-age kids drink themselves senseless. A conversation between two young men: “When did you get home last night?” “I don't remember.” “When did you wake up?” “About 4 this afternoon. I was in the elevator.”

The young women are really astonishing. The bar specializes in drinks for them - served in glasses the size of fish bowls. The bartender pours into each huge glass various brightly colored syrups - presumably sweet. Then he adds something that looks like fruit juice and pours into each glass a third of a liter of vodka. One tiny young woman, no more than 5 feet tall, orders two such drinks in less than half an hour. In Italy, drunkenness is such a small problem that there is no law prohibiting bartenders from serving drinks to customers who are already drunk.

The bar is small and crowded, and smoking is prohibited, so kids pour into the street. The laughter and drunken banter ricochet harshly off the walls of the buildings. Neighbors often complain to the police.

The kids in this case are all Americans. All of them at this one bar attend a certain small, conservative, religiously affiliated college in the United States. But the kids from this particular school are not alone. At this point, 38 U.S. colleges and universities have formal programs in Florence for thousands of U.S. students.

Many are an embarrassment. Not too long ago, newspapers here reprinted pictures of American girls relieving themselves in one of the great squares in Florence, in front of one of the beloved 15th-century churches designed by Filippo Brunelleschi.

Stroll through the center of Florence around midnight, after a proper Italian dinner, and chances are pretty good you will run into a bunch of kids making a whole lot more noise than everybody else in the neighborhood, some of them weaving drunkenly and falling down. Chances are 1 in

10 that they are English. Otherwise, they are sure to be American. There is no alternative. They are never Italian, French or from anywhere else on the Continent. Europeans are incredulous. They simply do not understand such behavior, which is totally unknown to the locals.

It is also a source of some serious problems. In a bizarre incident, criminal charges have been filed against an American student in Florence. According to the police, she and a friend tried to trespass onto the grounds of a large, private villa. A guard tried to stop them. There was a scuffle, and the friend received a knife wound in the leg. There was no firm indication whose knife it was.

The student and her friend walked a short distance to a public bench. He laid down, and she sat beside him. He slowly bled to death, with her sitting beside him with an unused cell phone. Apparently, she made no effort to help him, and she now claims she was so drunk she cannot remember anything. The Italian authorities don't know how to deal with her. Her inability to aid in her own defense is something they have not experienced.

There is widespread consensus that American women students in Florence have been subjected to a dramatically increased wave of rapes. But few, if any, are making any reports or filing any charges, because they have been so drunk so often in public that they would have difficulty making any charges stick.

Then there's the story of the young American woman student in Perugia, the university town not quite 100 miles south of here, who is now on trial for the murder of her English roommate.

Things have gotten so bad in Florence that U.S. Consul General Mary Ellen Countryman has said "loud, drunk and disrespectful" American students are just about the first thing she hears about when she meets an Italian. A previous consul-general was called on the carpet by the mayor of Florence, who demanded he do something.

A lawyer in Florence for one American college is asked about the problem. The answer: "You think alcohol is the problem? I'll tell you what the real problem is. They're all on drugs. They're all on Ritalin, or lithium, or anti-depressants, and they stop taking them, or they take them erratically." They neglect to follow up on their referrals to local psychiatrists, raising liability concerns.

So American parents who have failed to prepare their children to live in an adult world need to be aware that when they send their progeny off to Europe, in addition to imbibing the culture of the ages, they may well be imbibing suicidal amounts of alcohol.

Why are American kids so much more susceptible to binge drinking than Europeans? Why do they need so much more mental health care? Why do they need so much more psychotropic medication? Is there reason to suspect American kids are nowhere nearly as well prepared for life as their European contemporaries?

Travel holds up a mirror that lets us see ourselves better. From here, the image is pretty scary.

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