

AMERICAN HISTORY: SUMMARIES OF HISTORICAL ERAS

1. The Colonial Era and the Birth of a Nation

The Spanish first colonized North America in the fifteenth century. The British arrived early in the 17th century, establishing a variety of colonies along the East Coast. The colonist's desire to practice their religion freely was a major factor in the founding of the New England colonies and Maryland. Other colonies were established by government grants to powerful individuals. For one hundred and fifty years, the 13 colonies developed without much interference from the British government. The mother country provided opportunities for trade and commerce, military protection, and political stability without asking for much in return. However that relationship changed in the middle of the 18th century when the British began to tax the colonists for the costs of maintaining an increasingly expensive colonial empire. The Americans became increasingly resentful of these taxes and other restrictive legislation. By 1775, the colonies were in full rebellion. A year later, they boldly declared their independence against the greatest military power in the world. Over the next seven years, the movement for independence gained strength (with the assistance of the French) and the Americans finally achieved their goal in 1781 after a decisive military victory over the British.

Over the next several years, the fledgling nation struggled under a weak national government. The situation was largely rectified in 1787 when delegates from the thirteen states met in Philadelphia and wrote a new constitution. The young nation was tested early on with foreign policy crises, bitter internal conflicts between emerging political parties, and controversies that threaten to tear the nation apart. By 1814, after a bloody second war with England, the United States became more self-confident and was poised for a period of rapid expansion and change.

2. Expansion and Reform

Between 1820 and 1860, the United States experienced a period of profound growth and change. The population tripled in size during this period. Territorially speaking, the country grew into one of the largest nations in the world with purchases from Spain and France and the acquisition of territory through a war with Mexico. Americans began to believe that it was their "destiny" to span the whole North American continent, in spite of the many different peoples indigenous to the many regions of the land. The American economy also transformed itself during these early years of the Industrial Revolution, during which time advances in agriculture and transportation fueled the nation's growth. Expanding commerce and new technological advances increased the demand for workers in the emerging factories, which in turn led to an increase in immigration into northern cities. With economic change came social change. Women began to demand the right to vote as more men exercised that right; new religious sects and reform movements emerged; education became more accessible to the

general populace; and 'moral' issues like the prohibition of alcohol assumed some importance. However, one issue began to dominate the national conscious by 1850 – the issue of slavery. As this "peculiar institution" became more important to the southern economy, its northern critics became more vocal and influential. Territorial expansion forced the United States as a whole to confront slavery's role in the nation's future. This issue soon began to tear the nation apart.

3. The Civil War Era and Reconstruction

As the nation expanded Northerners and Southerners began to see each other's way of life as a threat to their own. At first compromise and nationalism eased the tensions, but after the Mexican-American War, attitudes became more divisive. Supreme Court decisions, popular literature, sporadic slave rebellions, and increasing violence contributed to the pressures for disunion. The election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860 sealed that fate. Soon thereafter eleven states seceded, the Confederacy was formed, and the nation brought war on itself. The Civil War was the bloodiest in American history, as the South defiantly defended their territory while the North struggled to restore the Union. As the war dragged on, the North came to view the conflict as a crusade against slavery. After four long years, during which the nature of war was violently redefined by new technology and military strategies, the exhausted North was finally able to overcome the devastated South. The United States would survive as a single nation and slavery was abolished.

4. Reconstruction: 1865-1877

Nevertheless, the North's efforts to rebuild the nation after the war were riddled with difficulties. Northern troops occupied the South and controlled state governments motivated by both a desire to help the freedmen and a disdain for Southerners. There were some minor gains for African-Americans. Through the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, the federal government attempted to give the freed slaves their civil rights including the right to vote. Many African-Americans became part of the political process; some even got elected to Congress as a result. But significant change would not come easily. Racism still manifested itself in the legislation passed by many local governments, legislation which discriminated, sometimes violently, against African-Americans. The Ku Klux Klan, for instance, became very powerful throughout the South. Most ex-slaves, now sharecroppers working many of the same fields they worked as slaves, faced segregation, racism, and violence in their everyday lives. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Plessy v Ferguson* decision that segregation of public facilities was legal as long as they were equal. Instead of promoting peaceful coexistence (since it clearly did not promote equality), this decision triggered the emergence of Jim Crow laws. Lacking the interest of white politicians, legislation regarding African-American rights was given severely inadequate enforcement. African-Americans were relegated to poor schools, parks, and other facilities that only got worse with time. Many finally escaped this system during the First World War by migrating *en masse* to the northern cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and New

York City to find work in the factories and rail yards. The Industrial Revolution continued steadily in the North, strengthening the economy and enlarging the cities. Eventually, the burden of policing a belligerent populace led the Northerners to give up the effort to "reconstruct" the South. Federal troops were withdrawn and, lacking a center of progressive political ideals, racist factions filled the political void of the South.

5. The United States Becomes Powerful (1865-1915)

The West

Native Americans continued to be driven westward as the U.S. expanded. Despite many heroic battles, the Native Americans were eventually overwhelmed by the resources and perpetual encroachment of the new American population. Native Americans were ultimately relegated to reservations. Around this time, the cattle industry dominated the economy of the West as cowboys herded their animals to the railroads that brought the food to the East.

The East

The population of cities, especially Chicago, exploded during this period. The harnessing and commodifying of electricity and the invention of the telephone allowed industries to expand at exponential rates. Immigrants from eastern Europe and Asia flooded into the cities to meet the demand for labor. But capitalist expansion proceeded quicker than the government was able to monitor. In order to keep profits, or even make them, industry leaders didn't invest in modern standards like a safe working environment, health care and a living wage. Rich corporations became extremely rich while underpaid factory workers worked long hours in terrible conditions. Trade unions developed and organized strikes to fight for better wages and humane treatment of workers. By the 1890's, people were putting pressure on the government to reform and help out the working class. Political parties emerged that represented the interests of the farmers, without much success at this point. In the cities, reformers achieved limited success in reducing governmental corruption and giving more political power to the people. "Progressives" also won court decisions that limited working hours, improved working conditions, and forced factories to help out injured employees. Women also became more aggressive in their fight to be recognized as equal in the eyes of the law, especially with regard to voting.

6. The United States Becomes A World Power (1880-1920)

During the years between 1865 and 1880, the United States did not take major parts in world affairs. But by 1880, the Industrial Revolution transformed this country into a powerful nation that was ready to flex its muscles. At this time, the U.S. defeated Spain in a war and gained territories in the Caribbean and the east Pacific and thereby began to assert more influence in Latin American and east Asian affairs. In 1917, the U.S. entered World War I and led France and England to victory over Germany. President Wilson expected that the United States would make the world "safe for democracy". When the Versailles Treaty was signed, ending the war, the United States

had become the most powerful country in the world. Wilson hoped that with this treaty, America would assume the responsibility of leading the world to a permanent peace.

7. The 1920's

After World War I, most of the world suffered major economic and political problems. The United States had been disillusioned by the war, and was wary of involvement in world affairs, so it entered a period of relative isolation. Congress's rejection of the Versailles Treaty reflected this mood. This rejection meant that the U.S. would not be part of the League of Nations, the predecessor to the United Nations.

The United States, had its own share of problems and divisions during this time: the Klan was more powerful than before, the fear of communism spread, science came into conflict with religion, farmers suffered bad harvests, and factory workers continued to be treated unfairly.

As with many periods, the upper classes of the 1920's enjoyed a sort of golden age. Jazz, speakeasies, silent movies, and new fashions became symbols of a youthful culture rebelling against traditional standards. The automobile, department store, the refrigerator, and the vacuum cleaner made life easier for those who had money. Women gained the right to vote and gained more equality with men. African-Americans in Harlem, New York were giving birth to a urban renaissance in literature, poetry, and music. However, many Americans had trouble adjusting to the dramatic changes taking place. Many people could not earn a decent living.

8. The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

As the 1920's drew to a close, many parts of the American economy were suffering, especially the automotive and agricultural industries. If the full extent of the nation's difficulties were not entirely clear to most at this time, problems of all sorts were made abundantly clear when the stock market crashed in 1929. This crash set off a chain reaction of events that left banks bankrupt, 25% of all Americans unemployed, and farmers starving. It was the worst economic crisis in American history and the rest of the world was dragged into it as well. Although President Hoover did make some efforts to turn the economy around, his efforts failed and he was blamed for the Depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President in 1932 and took immediate action. During the early days of his administration, Congress passed measures meant to help out banks, businesses, farmers, and workers. During his first two years in office, Roosevelt redefined the role of government. The emergence of employment programs, public works projects, and social security were attempts by the federal government to take more responsibility for the welfare of the people. While this created long term problems in the form of a massive government budget deficit, it gave the country a sense of purpose. Americans reelected Roosevelt to four terms of presidency.

These reforms, however, did not end the Great Depression. World War II did. The

Depression consumed most of America's thoughts and time, and gave her an excuse for not getting involved in European affairs. However, Adolph Hitler was gaining power in Germany and soon thrust all of Europe into war. Japan became an ally of Germany and gained an empire in the Pacific. This was viewed as a threat to this country, but military action did not seem imminent. The U.S. gradually came to the aid of England in its fight against Germany and officially entered the war when the Japanese attacked Pear Harbor on December 7, 1941. Once dragged into the war, the United States used all of its economic and political resources to win the conflict in both the Europe and the Pacific. Millions of people moved into jobs to support the war effort, including women. With the cooperation of England and the Soviet Union, Germany and Japan were eventually defeated. The dropping of the atomic bombs in August 1945 on Japan opened up a new era in American history.

9. The Cold War 1945-1989

Although the Nazis were defeated in Germany, a new rivalry developed between the United States and the Communist Soviet Union. As the result of the war, the U.S.S.R. now had control of eastern Europe. The Cold War was a name given to this conflict between the United States and its allies on one side, and the Soviet Union and its occupied communist allies on the other side. The communist ideology was (and, to many, still is) contrary to democratic ideology. The U.S. saw the strength of communism as a threat to democracy. To prevent the spread of communism in Europe, the United States gave massive aid to Western Europe to help it rebuild after the war and organized military alliances designed to 'contain' the spread of communism. In its determination to stop the spread of communism, the U.S. became engaged in costly struggles in Korea and Vietnam. Fear of the communist threat also led to domestic turmoil in the 1950s (with the McCarthy hearings) and foreign policy crises in Latin America and Europe in the early 1960s with mixed results. Finally, the commitment to combating communism led to America's involvement in a disastrous war in Vietnam. The hostility between the U.S. and the Soviet Union eased in the 1970s, but only temporarily. Tensions in eastern Europe and the Middle East rekindled the Cold War in the early 1980s. During the Reagan Administration, the United States built more nuclear weapons, experimented with new missile defense programs, and provided assistance to those fighting communism Latin America. While this latter effort led to another presidential political scandal, the Soviet Union eventually broke under the pressure of the weapons race. By the late 1980's, tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States eased as several treaties were signed. Finally, in 1989, communism in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. collapsed and the Cold War ended.

10. 1950's

The 1950's were prosperous years for the U.S., although not everyone shared in it. After the Great Depression and World War II, Americans sought luxuries and comfort. Fears of nuclear war and communism unveiled a dark side to this period, while, the baby boom, television, shopping malls, McDonald's, and conformity characterized

every day life. Meanwhile, the ***Brown v Board of Education*** Supreme Court decision outlawed segregation in public schools and sparked the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

11. 1960's-1970's

John Kennedy's election in 1960's ushered in a new era of optimism for the United States. JFK's short administration promoted the feeling that America could solve its own problems, make the world a better place, and even explore outer space. The Civil Rights movement also gained momentum during the early 1960s as protests employing different strategies of non-violent resistance began to dismantle the Jim Crow system in the South.

Kennedy's assassination stunned the nation, but the spirit of optimism continued during Lyndon Johnson's presidency. The new president sought to improve education and health care, expand voting rights and low cost housing, and improve the environment. The Civil Rights movement overcame southern resistance and the crusade became part of the national consciousness. The federal government finally came to accept the role of enforcing the rights of all Americans. However, when the movement shifted its focus to northern cities, it confronted more complex roadblocks that it failed to overcome. As the 1960s progressed, new black leaders and movements emerged that adopted more aggressive, sometimes violent strategies in dealing with poverty and discrimination.

Meanwhile, the costly and unsuccessful struggle in Vietnam unleashed other intense social forces. It gradually became clear that the U.S. could not win the war and young people became increasingly vocal in their protests against American participation. A new counter-culture developed with an emphasis on personal freedom, sexual liberation, rock music, and drugs. Women, American Indians, and Latinos also began to fight for more rights and equality. While their efforts did produce lasting social change, the optimism of the early 1960s was breaking down under the pressures of war and race. Assassinations, setbacks in the Vietnam War, war protests, and racial riots in the streets contributed to the feeling the nation was undergoing a crisis. The election of Richard Nixon to the presidency in 1968 was a sign that America was ready to get back on track.

The turbulence continued into the early 1970s, even as the country craved a return to "law and order". During the Nixon administration the United States managed to gradually end its involvement in Vietnam and reduce tensions with the communist world. Nixon's own accomplishments, however, were overshadowed by his own attempt to cover-up the illegal activities of his own administration, attempts which led to the subsequent downfall of his presidency.

12. Late 1970's-1999

Nixon's successor, Gerald Ford, attempted to restore the nation's confidence after Watergate and Vietnam. However, gasoline shortages and inflation damaged the economy and the public mood. Jimmy Carter was elected in 1976, focusing in his campaign on human rights and honesty. He did have some successes, including helping Egypt and Israel make peace after years of war. However, a hostage crisis in the Middle East created another long nightmare for the American public. The economy also suffered from a variety of economic problems during his administration.

Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 and tried to rekindle American pride and reduce the role of government in American economic life. He cut taxes and reduced funding to federal programs such as welfare. After overcoming a recession in the early 1980's, the American economy began to boom. However, the gap between the rich and poor widened during these years and the national debt increased dramatically. Another recession in the early 1990's helped William Clinton into office.

During the 1990's the United States has had to deal with Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the AIDS crisis, banking crises, and more government scandals. However, the economy boomed throughout the decade and the number of people on welfare was reduced. People began to think that American economy was becoming immune to economic difficulties. However, that optimism quickly faded with the start of the new millennium. Economic recession, the September 11th Al Qaeda attack, and the subsequent wars against terrorism in Afghanistan and the Iraqi regime dramatically exposed the difficulties of being the lone superpower in a violent world.