

Higher History: European and World

USA: 1918 – 1968, An Introduction







America's History: 15th – 20th Century

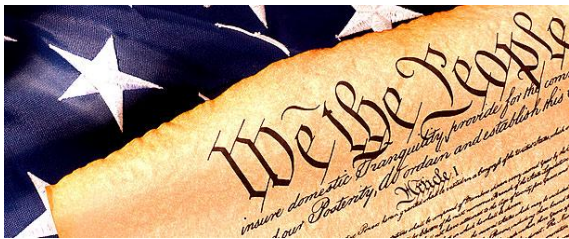
The Early Years ...

The greatest superpower of the modern era is a relatively new country in historical terms. 'Discovered' by Columbus in 1492, the continent of North America had already been visited by the Vikings in the 12th century. The Native Americans did not take kindly to them and so the Vikings returned to Europe. From about the late 16th century onwards, however, the eastern seaboard of North America became an attractive place to settle for European pilgrims wanting to flee from religious or political persecution in their own countries.



Let freedom reign ...

Such was the influx of British settlers that by 1770, the British Government was able to lay claim to 13 colonies stretching down the northeastern seaboard. The colonists built up large plantations of cotton and tobacco and were able to engage in a profitable trade with the 'mother country'. However, an arrogant and greedy Britain began to see the 13 colonies as an endless source of revenue and by 1776, the colonists had had enough of being taxed without having a say in how they were governed. In 1775, the War of Independence broke out. The colonists, under the command of George Washington, gradually defeated the might of the British army. On 4 July 1776, Thomas Jefferson had published the 'Declaration of Independence' and by 1783, the colonies had won that independence. In 1787 at Philadelphia, the representatives of these 13 states agreed to the Constitution of the United States by



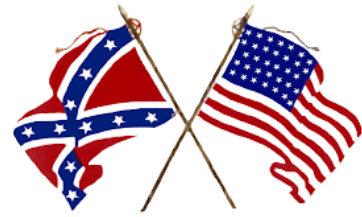
which the country would be governed. The specific rules of what the central FEDERAL (national) Government could do were written down along with the rights of the individual states. Equally important was the inclusion of a Bill of

Rights spelling out the precise rights and freedoms of the individual. The first President of the United States was to be George Washington.

A Family Disagreement ...

For the next 50 years or so, the fledgling nation grew and continued to add new states as the settlers, old and new, pushed further westwards. By the 1840s, the states of the Deep South found themselves increasingly at loggerheads with the Federal

Government over their rights to own slaves. As new states joined the Union, there were increasingly acrimonious arguments over whether they were to be slave states or free states. Eventually in 1861, a number of Southern states decided to secede (break away) from the Union and to form the *Confederacy of the United States of America*. The American Civil War from 1861-65, it was not fought by the North simply to free the Black slaves in the south; it was a war over preserving the Union and determining the rights of Federal versus State government. The Civil War was a bloody and traumatic experience for the USA but ultimately the North triumphed under the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln. From 1865 until the end of the century, the USA underwent a period of reconstruction. The liberated slaves found that life had scarcely improved now that they had their freedom. Most Southern states continued to discriminate against Blacks, whilst those who migrated to the growing industrial cities of the North found that many that lived there also held them in contempt.



The USA Comes of Age ...



Between the Civil War and World War I, the USA 'came of age'. In less than 50 years, it changed from being a rural nation to an urban one. Cities flourished, as did factories and steel mills; transcontinental railroads were built and vast agricultural holdings were a feature. Alongside came the evils of rapid development – monopolies tended to develop; factory-working conditions were poor and cities developed so rapidly that the ever-growing population could neither be housed nor governed properly.

“During most of the period 1877-1897 the history of the USA was being made on the quay sides where the immigrants landed; in the valleys of the Rockies where the railwaymen were linking the Atlantic and the Pacific; on the cattle ranches and the wheat lands of the Great Plains; in the silver mines of Nevada and the copper mines of Montana; in the stockyards of Chicago and the steel foundries of Pittsburgh; in the bankers' headquarters in Wall Street and the offices of great businessmen. These years were the greatest age of American expansion, when the people of the USA made their land the greatest agricultural and industrial nation on earth.”

Money talks ...

Industries such as iron and steel forged ahead. Andrew Carnegie, a Scot who came to the USA at the age of 12, brought advancement to the steel industry. The business he established was allied with others and because it was so large could get very favourable rates from the railroads and others; it had capital for expansion. Others copied what Carnegie did. The age of Big Business had arrived. Businessmen realised if they could combine competing businesses into one single



organisation they could control both production and the market. Huge alliances of firms in the same industry or trade were established, called corporations or trusts, for example the Standard Oil Company and the United States Steel Corporation. These trusts came to dominate American industry in the late 19th century. Although trusts did much to develop the resources of the USA, they also did great harm to American life. Small firms were ruined, prices were undercut, and bribery was common; strikes were broken up. Gradually opinion turned against the trusts. The Anti-Trust Act of 1890 aimed to stop the growth of trusts and break down those already formed. However, those who believed in private enterprise and laissez-faire opposed the anti-trust laws. Further attempts were made to control the trusts with mixed results and Big Business continued to feature strongly in American life and politics. In 1913, the USA produced about 32% of the world's industrial goods, more than Britain and Germany put together.

Super Power USA ...

The turn of the century heralded the USA's first hesitant steps at becoming a world power. Much of the 19th century had been spent expanding and developing internally but Americans slowly began to turn their eyes outwards towards the rest of the world. A short war with Spain in 1898 enabled her to take possession of the Philippines and Cuba whilst in 1930 a significant move was made when she



negotiated with Panama the right to build the Panama Canal linking the Atlantic with the Pacific. When war broke out in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson was elected on the promise that the USA would not intervene. However, the participation of the USA was almost inevitable and when it

did come about in 1917, it was decisive. The First World War cost the USA \$20,000,000,000. Government control was extended over every aspect of American life. Emerging out of that conflict and the world's strongest economic power, the USA sought to determine the future conduct of world diplomacy through the creation of the League of Nations. This dream was unfulfilled for the time being as the isolationists in US political life voted against joining the League. The war changed America in many ways and it hastened the coming of changes that had been on their way before 1917.

Governing America

The Constitution of the USA

The 'Founding Fathers', the men who created the United States in the late 18th century, originally wrote the constitution. The Constitution defines the activities of government and the rights of the people. It is a federal constitution because the original 13 colonies wished to join for certain purposes of Government e.g. defence, but to remain separate for other purposes, e.g. education. The constitution therefore divides the powers of Government between the Federal Government in Washington and the states. This means that US citizens are subject to two sets of laws – federal and state law.



Federal Government

- President
- Congress
- Supreme Court



1. To provide for the nation's defence
2. To collect taxes and borrow money
3. To control trade between states and between the USA and other countries
4. To control foreign policy
5. To provide for the nation's 'general welfare'



State Government

The State Government has powers within its own borders.

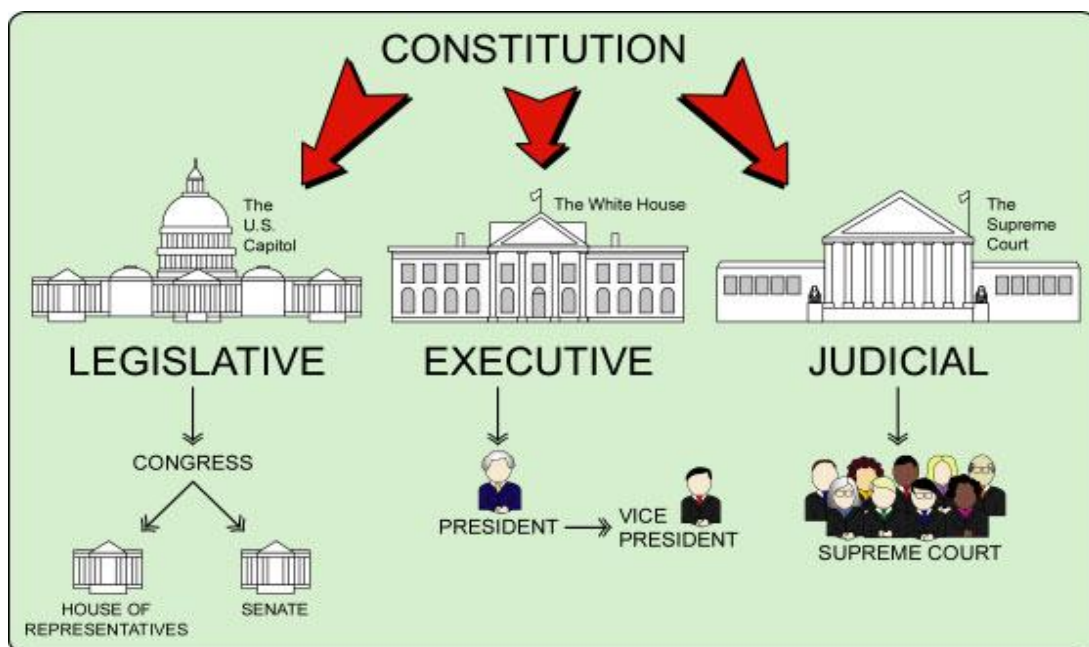


1. To keep law and order
2. To protect public health
3. To provide educational facilities
4. To control living and working conditions
5. To help those in need

In the twentieth century, the powers of the Federal and State Governments have overlapped increasingly as the Federal Government has begun to take action on matters that were previously left entirely to the State Governments. This has caused tension between the two.

States' Rights V Federal Might ...

The USA has a federal system of Government. This means there is both a federal (central) Government situated in Washington DC and a series of state Governments. The USA literally is a union of states, with each cherishing its own rights and customs. There were originally 13 states, but as the continent was settled, others were added. By 1919, there were 48 states. Most states felt they had voluntarily given up aspects of their sovereignty to the federal Government in Washington, but they jealously guarded what they retained and were wary of any excessive federal Government interference. The USA is a republic (no Monarchy), with three arms of federal Government. The Legislative Branch makes the laws that apply to all of the United States. The Executive Branch administers the country. The Judicial Branch explains and interprets the Constitution and the laws.



The Government of the People, by the People, for the People ...

The Constitution clearly sets out the different roles of the different branches of Government. It was designed with a series of 'checks and balances' to ensure no one branch of Government could become too powerful. When the majority in either or both Houses of Congress is of a different political party to the President, he can find it very difficult to govern effectively. He may have to administer laws he disagrees with; often he cannot get Congress to pass laws he wants. The President does have the power to veto – 'say no to' – laws he disagrees with, but if both houses agree by a two-thirds majority, they can override his veto. The Supreme Court too can restrict the legislative programme of the administration by declaring laws unconstitutional.

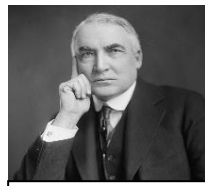
The Executive:

The President heads the Executive Branch. He is elected every 4 years through a complex voting system. The President is charged with carrying out the laws. Traditionally he would ask Congress to draft legislation he favoured and would very rarely draft laws himself. President Franklin D Roosevelt broke with this tradition during the New Deal years of the 1930s and increasingly produced his own legislation for Congressional approval. The President appoints a Cabinet to help him govern.

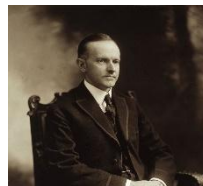
Presidents of the USA, 1913-1969



Woodrow
Wilson
(Democrat)
1913-1921



Warren G.
Harding
(Republican)
1921-23



Calvin
Coolidge
(Republican)
1923-29



Herbert
Hoover
(Republican)
1929-33



Franklyn D.
Roosevelt
(Democrat)
1933-1945



Harry S.
Truman
(Democrat)
1945-53



Dwight D.
Eisenhower
(Republican)
1953-61



John F.
Kennedy
(Democrat)
1961-63



Lyndon B.
Johnson
(Democrat)
1963-69

The Legislature:

Congress is the legislature in the USA. It has the job of framing the laws. It is divided into two houses. Both houses need to agree before a law is passed.

- House of Representatives: this is composed of congressional representatives directly elected and representing the people of the USA. In particular, it has the task of raising revenue.
- Senate: this was composed of 96 senators during the 1920s-1930s, two from each state. The Senate has the power to ratify or reject presidential appointments and may if necessary impeach (prosecute) the President or any of his Officers.

The Judiciary:

At the head of the judiciary is the Supreme Court, made up of nine senior judges appointed by the President. Their job is to ensure laws are actually legal and follow

the principles of the Constitution. Below the Supreme Court there is a network of federal courts in each state spread throughout the country.

A two horse race ...

The main political parties in the USA over the course of the c.20th were the Republicans and the Democrats.

- 1920s-Republicans tended to favour wealth, businesses and a reduced Government role. The Republicans carried rural areas and small towns, except in the South where they were seen as the party who freed the slaves.
- Democrats tended to have a wider base of support and adopted a more liberal line on issues. They tended to be supported by liberals, minority ethnic groups, and the less well-off and urban dwellers. During Roosevelt's period in office, there was a significant realignment in political affiliation, with blacks in particular turning to his party, the Democrats.