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978-1-107-58742-7 – A/AS Level History for AQA The American Dream: Reality and Illusion, 1945–1980

Tony McConnell Adam I. P. Smith Michael Fordham David Smith

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The American Dream: Reality and Illusion, 1945–1980

A/AS Level History for AQA
Student Book

Tony McConnell and Adam I.P. Smith

Series Editors: Michael Fordham and David Smith

Cambridge University Press

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Contents

About this Series	iv	5 Republican Reaction: the Nixon Presidency, 1969–1974	125
Introduction	1	Introduction: the president, not a crook	126
Part 1 Prosperity, Inequality and Superpower Status, 1945–1963	11	The presidential election of 1968 and the reasons for Nixon's victory	126
1 Truman and Post-war America, 1945–1952	12	The restoration of conservative social policies	130
Introduction: an accidental president	13	The limits of American world power	135
The United States in 1945 and the legacies of the world war	13	The Watergate Affair and its aftermath	142
The USA as a Superpower	20	6 The USA after Nixon, 1974–1980	149
African Americans in North and South	35	Introduction: the presidency imperiled?	150
2 Eisenhower: Tranquillity and Crisis, 1952–1960	40	Ford and Carter as presidents	151
Introduction: a reluctant president	41	The position of the USA as a world power	156
The presidency	41	African Americans in North and South	164
The growth of the American economy in 1950s and the impact of the 'consumer society'	47	The USA by 1980	166
The USA and the Cold War	51	Glossary	176
African Americans in North and South	58	Bibliography	181
3 John F. Kennedy and the 'New Frontier', 1960–1963	65	Acknowledgements	182
Introduction: Kennedy and Camelot	66	Index	183
The presidential election of 1960 and reasons for Kennedy's victory	66		
Challenges to American power	72		
African Americans in North and South	80		
The United States by 1963	86		
Part 2 Challenges to the American Dream, 1963–1980	93		
4 The Johnson Presidency, 1963–1969	94		
Introduction: the master of the Senate, as president	95		
Johnson as president	95		
Maintaining American world power	102		
African Americans in North and South	108		
Social divisions and protest movements	113		

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[More information](#)A/AS Level History for AQA: **The American Dream: Reality and Illusion, 1945–1980**

About this Series

Cambridge A/AS Level History for AQA is an exciting new series designed to support students in their journey from GCSE to A Level and then on to possible further historical study. The books provide the knowledge, concepts and skills needed for the two-year AQA History A Level course, but it's our intention as series editors that students recognise that their A Level exams are just one step to a potential lifelong relationship with the discipline of history. This book has further readings, extracts from historians' works and links to wider questions and ideas that go beyond the scope of an A Level course. With this series, we have sought to ensure not only that the students are well prepared for their examinations, but also that they gain access to a wider debate that characterises historical study.

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Key terms



Speak like a historian



Voices from the past/Hidden voices



Practice essay questions



Taking it further



Thematic links



Chapter summary

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Michael Fordham and David L Smith

Series editors

Introduction

The USA after 1945

In 1945 Americans who, 25 years earlier, had decided in the wake of the Great War more or less en masse to be **isolationist** – that is, not to participate in international affairs – found themselves citizens of one of the two world **Superpowers** that had won the Second World War. Their economy, which had fallen into depression in the 1930s and recovered only barely as a result of President Roosevelt's **New Deal**, which vastly increased the power of the presidency, was now running in overdrive because most of the other major economies of the world were either ruined by war, or vastly indebted to the Americans, or both. As Winston Churchill said in 1945, 'The United States stands at this moment at the summit of the world'. Its industrial and technological might gave it the ability to prosper in the new world formed in the aftermath of the Second World War; its experience of saving Europeans from two particularly all-consuming and barbaric conflicts gave it the impetus to do so.

From an American perspective, exerting massive influence over world affairs – assuming a position of leadership of the 'free' (as opposed to **communist** and controlled) world – now made perfect sense. American goods would find eager markets abroad – all the more so because America, at the end of the Second World War uniquely among major nations, had an intact and enhanced, indeed superpowered, manufacturing sector as well as the infrastructure necessary to

🔑

Key terms

New Deal: the name for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's efforts to restructure and support the failing American economy in the 1930s. Historians are divided on whether there was one New Deal or three separate New Deals. In modern American thought the New Deal is seen as a cornerstone of liberal politics.

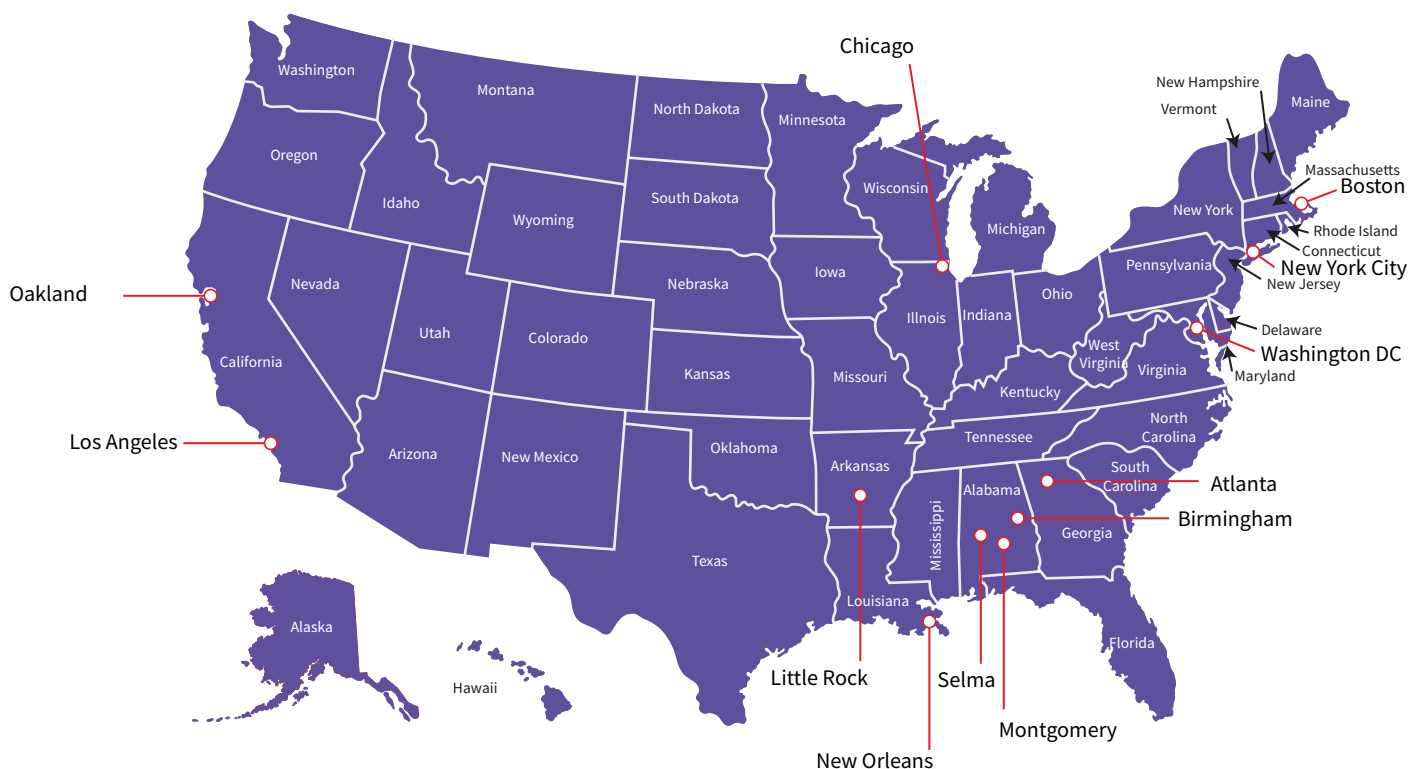


Figure 0.1: Map of the United States of America.

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transport goods around the globe. American culture would be transmitted just as easily. To Hollywood movies would be added the even more ubiquitous output of American television. American commerce would follow, as anyone who has ever eaten a mass-produced burger washed down by a syrupy drink knows.

In 1945 the **president** was Harry S. Truman, who had come to office following the sudden death of his predecessor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 1981 his successor, Ronald Reagan, who had survived an assassin's bullet early in his term (he apologised to his wife with the words, 'Honey, I forgot to duck') presided over one of the two world Superpowers. The United States, led by its confident 40th president, used its long-established position as the leader of the democratic capitalist world to launch an ideological and economic attack upon its fellow Superpower, the communist Soviet Union, which Reagan branded an 'evil empire'. By 1990, in the presidency of Reagan's vice president and successor George H.W. Bush, the Soviet Union was collapsing: the United States stood alone as the only Superpower left.

This textbook is intended to show the student what happened between the moment Harry Truman became president, taking over from the man who won the war and changed the presidency, and the election that brought Reagan, the Republican figure whose memory is idolised by his party, to the **White House**. There is an idea expressed by both these men – and by many others who have held their high office – that America has a special, privileged place as leader of the democratic world. This is the idea of **American Exceptionalism** – America as the 'last best hope of earth', which often seems to dominate modern American politics and is rooted in history: the story of America is the story of becoming and remaining a force for good, the global Superman of 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'.

The textbook is arranged by president. It begins with Truman, whose triumphs have been overshadowed by the horror of the Korean War, and who remains the only man to have ordered the use of nuclear weapons in warfare. He was succeeded by Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican rather than a Democrat (although both parties had wanted to claim him as their own), and a war hero rather than a politician. He was followed in turn by John F. Kennedy, whose reputation, enhanced by his glamorous nature and early death, seems to outweigh his achievements, and by Lyndon Johnson, who was either a pernicious bully or an effective statesman, or both, and whose attempts to reform American society were partially successful but then thwarted by the national horror of the Vietnam War. He was succeeded by Richard Nixon, a man capable of subtle diplomacy and of cynical warfare, and of precise electioneering and criminal conspiracy. The presidents who followed, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, inherited a damaged office and a damaged economy; the latter's admission that all was not well with America helped to give his successor Ronald Reagan a chance to restate the **American Dream** on his way to the White House.

By 1980 America was in a position to win the **Cold War**, although few except the incoming president seemed to have realised it. Its economy was strong even during a recession. Its culture dominated the western world. Its military was the world's finest. It had put a man on the Moon, and remains the only nation to

**Key terms****American Exceptionalism:**

the idea that because America has geographical, economic and political advantages, it has a responsibility to use those advantages well and (sometimes) to assume a position of global leadership.

have done so. Communism was crumbling as an economic system, and although revolutionary socialism survived as a way of organising politics, the free market had begun to creep into communist economies. The recession of the 1970s, the degradation of politics by three presidents, one a criminal and two widely thought to be unfit for high office, the stalling of any real progress towards further civil rights, and humiliation in warfare in Vietnam, had prompted some Americans to think that the dream had become a nightmare. By the end of the so-called Reagan Revolution the Cold War was won, a new wave of prosperity was beginning and American culture was so dominant that historians such as Francis Fukuyama came to believe that serious historical change was over, because mankind had found in the American Way the best way to live. It was, it seemed, morning in America.

Major events and themes in American history to 1945

The United States of America had been formed in 1776 when 13 British colonies, arranged along the east coast of North America, had declared independence from the British government, which they perceived as **tyrannical** and oppressive of their rights. Under the leadership of men such as Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, which asserted that all men had the right to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’, and George Washington, the general who won the Revolutionary War that accompanied the Declaration, a new nation was formed. In 1787 it reformed itself again with a written Constitution, which came into force in 1789.

The young nation soon came to take over the whole central section of the continent on which it found itself. A combination of diplomacy, force and the sense of entitlement that came from the American notion of **Manifest Destiny** allowed the United States to assume its present territorial boundaries by 1890, to the detriment of the **Native American** populations who already lived there.

The Constitution of the United States of America

In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, American leaders produced a loose confederation of states, which did not really work. The Constitution produced to address these issues (see Figure 0.2) was designed specifically to strengthen the union between the states, and it was based upon various ideological principles which dated back in some cases to 17th-century England – where they had long since ceased to operate. It has various key features:

- Separation of powers would ensure that no one branch of government – and no individual – could become too powerful.
- There would be a single executive, called a **president**, whose powers would be heavily limited by the legislature and by the judiciary, the **Supreme Court**.
- The Constitution would be federalist, which meant that the central Government would be sovereign, and so would the individual states – the **Constitution** would outline which body was sovereign on each particular issue. The polite fiction – and popular rhetoric – was of course that the people would be sovereign.
- The Constitution could be changed (by amendment) only when there was genuine general agreement that it should be.



Key terms

Cold War: the name for the undeclared hostility and tension between communists and capitalists that began after the Second World War and ended in 1990. During the Cold War the USA assumed a position of leadership of the free, democratic, capitalist world. The leading nation in the communist world was the USSR.



Key terms

Manifest Destiny: the idea that America was and is fated to dominate the continent of North America, the western hemisphere and the world. It drove expansion in the 19th century and helped to define America’s foreign policy in the second half of the 20th.



Key terms

Constitution: the set of ideas about how a country should be governed – its institutions, and the **rights** and responsibilities of its government and people.

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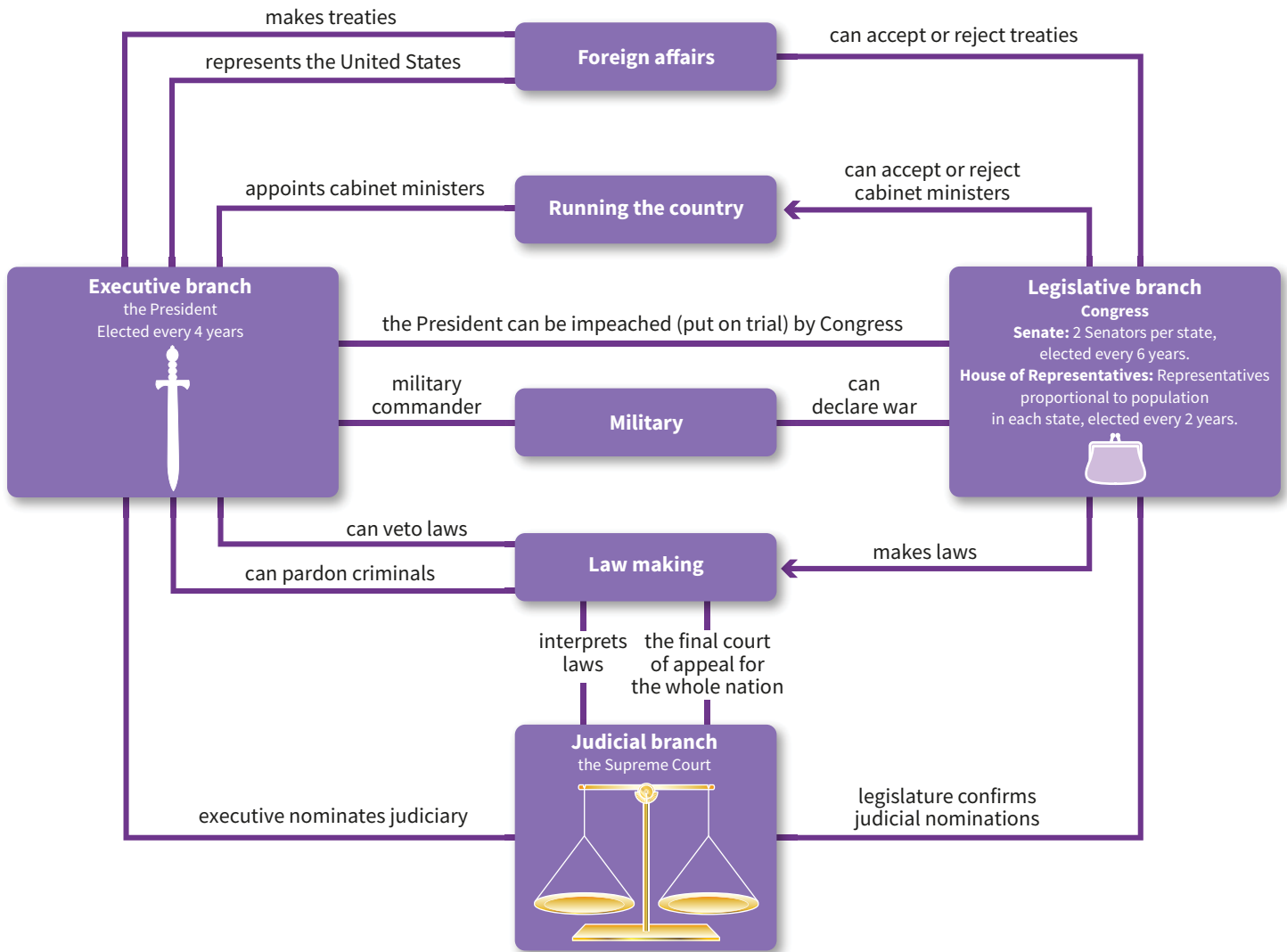



Figure 0.2: The US Constitution.

Race and society in America

The early prosperity of the United States had been partly founded on the institution of slavery; the slaves were black. From 1861 to 1865 there had been a civil war caused in large part by a disagreement over the question of whether slavery should continue; the northern states, in which slavery had stopped and where it was unprofitable, had emerged victorious over the southern states. The results for the South were catastrophic. White southern Americans had lost a destructive war fought mainly in their territory; their slaves had been emancipated, meaning that they had lost a considerable portion of their assets. They had, however, for the most part retained their land. Black Americans, increasingly to be identified as African Americans, had been left more or less at the mercy of the hostile white population. They owned no land, and had little education; they were not allowed to use many public facilities (a process known as **'segregation'** and based on **'Jim Crow'** laws – see Figure 0.3) and there were large numbers of extra-judicial killings of black people – known as **lynchings**.

 **Key terms**

lynching: an extra-judicial killing by a mob. In the popular image, this usually meant the hanging of a young black man from a tree, although not all lynchings were hangings. The vast majority of victims were black; many who were not were Hispanic. More than a hundred lynchings occurred every year in the South throughout the 1890s.

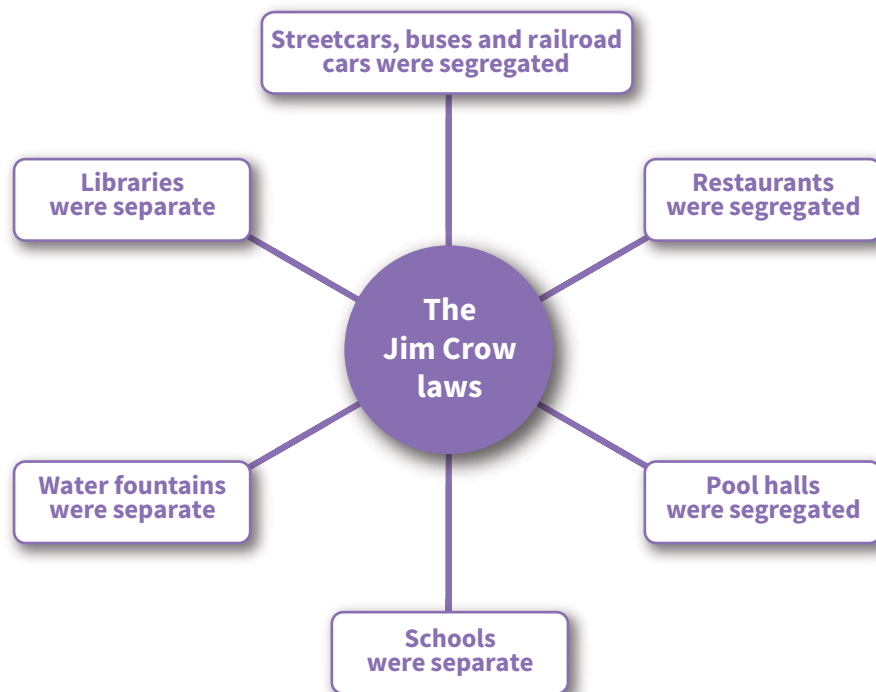


Figure 0.3: Jim Crow laws in the South.

By 1945 the position of African Americans in the South had barely changed, but millions of African Americans had moved to the North. There was certainly racism among white populations in the North, and there was lynching; African Americans were more likely than not to live in poverty, but conditions were still better in the North than in the South. Black leaders had sought and suggested a number of solutions – from the development of black leadership, to wholesale acquiescence, to leaving America entirely to go back to Africa (a policy that was of some alarm to African governments).

A New York City play of 1909 had been the first to refer to that city as a ‘melting pot’. This meant that people of different races met in New York City and mixed together freely. Very little could have been further from the truth. Lower Manhattan was (and is) a patchwork quilt of ethnicities – Chinese here, Italians there, and so forth. There was always the potential for conflict between nationalities in the great cities, which were largely in the more urbanised North.

In the South, the ethnic divisions were even clearer. There, segregation was commonplace and legally protected; lynching went unpunished; the black community was itself divided over what to do about it. Those whose families had been slaves in the 1860s were free in 1945, but their freedom was circumscribed by violence, racism and an almost complete lack of civil rights. The South, although urbanising, was still largely agricultural.

The American West, home of the cowboy in the late 19th century, was very badly affected by the Depression. Overfarming and drought turned parts of Oklahoma and Texas into a dustbowl. There was still, out West, plenty of room for expansion.

A/AS Level History for AQA: **The American Dream: Reality and Illusion, 1945–1980**

The Depression and the New Deals

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 had started a chain of events that had led to a serious economic depression in America. It had also led to the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), whose philosophy was to be as active as possible in addressing America's economic problems, see what worked and continue those policies. His economic policies are known together as the New Deals (as in, 'A New Deal for the American people'). From 1933 to 1939 he stabilised the American economy through a combination of economic stimulus, infrastructure spending and social security; most importantly, though, he established a number of federal agencies that both altered the balance of American federalism, taking power away from the individual states, and increased the power of the president himself. Whether the New Deals would have worked in stabilising the American economy long term is an interesting but moot point; American economic progress was faltering on the eve of the Second World War, but vastly helped by the outbreak of hostilities. America became able to lend money and sell weapons to the Allies; unemployment, which had been high in the 1930s, was all but eliminated.

American politics

From 1865 to 1945 there were only two political parties with a realistic chance of winning either the presidency of the United States or control of **Congress**. These were the Republicans and the Democrats. The Republicans were the more right-wing party, but they were also the party of African Americans as they had been the party of Lincoln, the northern Republican president who had emancipated the slaves in the Civil War. Since the Civil War the Democrats had barely won the presidency, needing some form of crisis to help them to beat the Republicans. In 1932, in the midst of the economic crisis, they had won again: Franklin Roosevelt was a Democrat. He created a 'New Deal coalition' of voters who voted for him again and again (he won four presidential elections; nobody else had won more than two). The Democrats were becoming the party of the urban North, with its poor immigrants and internal migrants, many of whom were African American. They still retained the support of the South.

America 1945–1980: major themes

As you read this book, you will be able to build a narrative – in fact several narratives, should you choose – of American history. There are also certain themes to draw out:

- What did the American Dream mean, and how did that change over time? How far did people in America actually live it?
- How prosperous was America, and was that prosperity shared equally, if shared at all?
- What did it mean to be American? Was it solely defined in opposition to being 'un-American'?
- What made American **democracy** distinctive, and how did it develop?

You should attempt to trace these themes, where appropriate, throughout your studies.

How far was the American Dream a reality?

The American Dream was defined in 1931 like this: ‘Life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement’. Where a person was born, or to whom, should not matter. The American Dream is about liberty and prosperity. In 1941, nearly half of all white families and almost 90% of black families lived in poverty. One in seven workers was unemployed. By 1945 unemployment was negligible. The US commanded half the world’s manufacturing capacity and more than half the world’s electricity, owned two thirds of the world’s gold stocks and half of all its monetary reserves. It produced twice as much petrol as the rest of the world combined. It had the world’s largest merchant fleet, a near monopoly of the emerging industries of aerospace and electronics – and, for a time, a monopoly of the technology of atomic power. The seeds of the coming consumer boom had been sown. The American Government was also able to set itself at the centre of a (western) world system of finance. The Bretton Woods System, set up in 1944 and activated in 1945, stabilised world finance by pegging currencies to gold and to each other and created the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The general idea was to ensure that trade could carry on openly, without countries seeking to put undue pressure on one another. From an American point of view this was perfect as it gave the country access to more markets for its economic surplus – and this money could be used to ensure that the American Dream came true.



Thematic link: American Dream

How far was American prosperity shared by all Americans?

Some Americans benefited from all this cash – many Americans, in fact, and the numbers of Americans in dire poverty decreased. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, known informally as the GI Bill of 1944, enabled massive government-funded expansion of higher education and government-backed mortgages, spurring home ownership for the many, many young Americans who had fought in the Second World War. Poverty remained, though, and some were excluded from participation in the rising tide of prosperity.

One of the most famous dreams of the period was ‘a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream’, expressed by the African-American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr, that segregation would end and that people of all races would live in harmony in an integrated American community. Life for African Americans has improved dramatically since 1945; they have access to justice, can vote, are not formally excluded from any part of civil society, and are no longer brutally and randomly attacked. All this is theoretically true – but there are dramatic counter examples even from the 21st century. Moreover, African Americans are disproportionately poor, and even without the influence of the racism still endemic in American society, poor Americans did not experience the American Dream to anything like the extent of the rich.

**Thematic link: prosperity**

How did Americans view themselves at home and abroad?

If America's new position in the world made geopolitical and economic sense, and the example of American **isolationism** after the First World War made it clear that, this time, the victory had to be exploited, that was well enough: there were also other reasons for America to accept her place as the leading nation of the democratic world. During the American Civil War of 1861–65, President Abraham Lincoln had fought to keep the United States united, declaring that American democracy served as an example to all mankind. This was just one reason why America was exceptional. In the 19th century many Americans had accepted America's 'Manifest Destiny' to dominate the continent and the hemisphere, to create a nation founded on the ideology of individual freedom. Here, now, was America's chance to spread that ideology around the world.

The new world order was one of constant though undeclared war. The Cold War pitted the United States against another country that had emerged from the Second World War victorious: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The USSR had been severely damaged by German invasion in a way that America had not, and started off behind in the race for global supremacy. The alliances of wartime turned very quickly to rivalry. It was clear that only the USSR could challenge the Americans, and they had economic and ideological reasons to do so. If the USA sought world domination for its ideological system of democracy, so did the USSR, which saw itself as the first stage in a programme of socialism for the entire world. Free-market capitalism, with limited safeguards designed to prevent the disaster of another stock market crash, was incompatible with centrally planned communist economies. The Cold War was an ideological and economic struggle, given extra spice by the presence of nuclear weapons, and led in the West by America's president. In his **inaugural address** in 1961 the new president, John F. Kennedy, addressed the whole world as he accepted the challenge of world leadership on behalf of the USA. By the 1980s President Ronald Reagan was happy to characterise the USSR as the 'evil empire' of dangerous atheists who would like nothing more than to subvert Americans away from truth, justice and the American Way.

Being 'American' had always mattered. To be un-American was inherently suspicious. Perhaps, if you were not American, you were a communist – a spy sent by the 'evil empire'. Perhaps, if you questioned the legitimacy of a war that was achieving nothing other than the deaths of young men, you were un-American. How far did the soldiers of the Vietnam War, whose average age was 19, live the American Dream? And how much of a crisis did defeat in Vietnam pose to American identity?

**Thematic link: identity**

What was the nature of American democracy?

The Cold War era was an era of protest. It was an era of extraordinary public condemnation of the government of a kind that seems commonplace to us but was not at the time. We tend to remember the occasions on which protestors were attacked by dogs, or shot, or locked up, but the remarkable thing about American protest was how many people were involved and how much effect it actually had. One of the fundamental contradictions of the period is this: the American government could during the Cold War deploy troops across the world and exercise moral leadership for the majority of the most developed nations of the world, but it still had to listen to protests in its own cities. Soviet leaders in the USSR would never have put up with this kind of behaviour, and they said so.

There is also a story to tell about high politics during this time. The dominance of the Democratic Party was based on a **New Deal** coalition of white southerners, organised labour and northern workers. It was formed in 1932, consolidated by FDR, held together by Truman and appealed to by every subsequent Democratic presidential candidate in this period. Over time this coalition fractured and became harder to put together, most clearly in the white South, with Reagan's election marking, overtly, the end of the Democratic 'Solid South' and making it harder for Democrats to win the White House and, eventually, Congress.



Thematic link: democracy

How to use this book

This book is intended to provide a chronological and thematic overview of American history from 1945 to 1980. Inevitably, some topics and events are left out, or given slightly less weight than others. The authors hope that this book will be a starting point for your study, rather than its end. We would encourage you to look at the past from different perspectives. In particular, you should remember that the vast majority of Americans who lived during the hundred years you are studying were not presidents or members of Congress. Although leaders can be very important, particularly in times of crisis, the culture and prosperity of any country are built upon its ordinary people.

As you read, remember that we, as authors, are historians like any other. We present a version of the past that we believe to be accurate. Because we are writing a textbook, we also present alternative views of American history, and try to give you a flavour of the additional reading you might find, and what it might tell you. If we present something as a fact, it means that we have checked it and believe it to be true. If we present something as an opinion, it is just that: our opinion, and it is no more or less valid than anyone else's opinion simply because we have put it in a textbook.

The individual chapters of the textbook are arranged by presidency: it is up to the reader to decide whether this is a helpful way of arranging their thoughts. The chapters are then further arranged into thematic sections about politics, economics, international relations, etc. Many of the themes of American history

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transcend particular periods; the four themes outlined in the section entitled ‘America 1945–1980: major themes’ are identified when they occur in the textbook, to help you to build up your own picture of how much America changed from 1945 to 1980, and what caused these changes. As you work through this course you should consider these themes, and when you revise you might wish to revisit them.

Although candidates for the AS examination need only work through this book to the end of Chapter 3, they are encouraged to read through Chapter 4 as well to gain some idea of what happened next; they should take care to base their answers only on events up to the end of Kennedy’s presidency in November 1963.