## THE HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY OF THE USA

**WHAT DO AMERICANS MEAN WHEN THEY USE THE WORD “DEMOCRACY”?**

Abraham Lincoln, one of the best-loved and most respected of America's presidents, said that the US had a government “of the people, by the people and for the people”. He called the United Slates "a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." No one has formulated a better way of describing the principles of the American political system, as Americans understand it. The Constitution, laws and traditions of the United States give the people the right to determine who will be the leader of their nation, who will make the laws and what the laws will be. The people have the power to change the system. The Constitution guarantees individual freedom to all.

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DEMOCRACY

- Democracy as a form of government disappeared from ancient Greece and, over the centuries, the translation of the principles and ideals of democracy into practice has been very rare throughout the world. Most people have been ruled by kings, queens, emperors or small elite groups and, except for certain members of the nobility, the people have had no voice in their government. That was the situation in Europe in 1492.

- By the 1700s, England had established 13 colonies in the eastern part of what is now the United States.

- Some of the early British colonists had come to the New World in hopes of enriching themselves; others came because. Britain forced them to leave – they were troublemakers or people who could not pay their debts. Some came because of the opportunity, which did not exist for them in Europe, to own land or practice a trade.

- In the course of its long history as a nation, Great Britain had taken several steps toward democracy. England (including Wales) had a parliament winch made laws, and most people enjoyed a degree of individual freedom.

- William Penn, a member of the Religious Society of Friends, founded the colony of Pennsylvania, where he set up laws protecting freedom of religion and speech. Those laws also enabled the Pennsylvania colonists to have a voice in their local government.

- Life in the colonies also helped strengthen democratic ideas. They had to work together to build shelter, provide food, clear the land for farms and in general to make their new home land livable for them. This need for cooperation and sharing, combined with a belief in individualism, strengthened the idea that in the New World people were equal; that no one should have special rights and privileges.

- Each colony had its own government

# WAR AND INDEPENDENCE

- The British government required people to pay taxes, but gave them no voice in pausing the tax laws. The British motherland determined what the colonists could produce and with whom they could trade.

- In 1774, a group of leaders from the colonies met and formed the “Continental Congress”, which informed the king of the colonists’ belief that, as free Englishmen, they should have a voice in determining laws that affected them. The king and the conservative government in London paid no heed to the concerns of the colonists, and many colonists felt that this was an injustice, which gave them reason to demand independence from Britain. In 1775, fighting broke out between New England militia and British soldiers.

- On July 4, 1776, Continental Congress issued a Declaration of Independence, primarily written by Thomas Jefferson, a farmer and lawyer from the colony of Virginia. The Declaration described them as "free and independent slates" and officially named them the United Stales of America.The document says that all people are created equal, that all have the right to “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

-With help from France, England's old enemy, and from other Europeans, the American armies, led by George Washington, a surveyor and gentleman farmer from Virginia, won the War of Independence. The peace treaty signed in 1783.

## THE AMERICAN

### POLITICAL SYSTEM

# CONSTITUTION

- During the war, the states had agreed to work together by sending representatives to a national congress patterned after the "Congress of Delegates" that conducted the war with England. It would raise money to pay off debts of the war, establish a money system and deal with foreign nations in making treaties. The agreement that set up this plan of cooperation was called the Articles of Confederation.

- Many Americans worried about the future. How could they win the respect of other nations if the states did not pay their depts? How could they improve .the country by building roads or canals if the stales would not work together? They believed that the Congress needed more power.

- The plan for the government was written in very simple language in a document called the Constitution of the United Slates. The Constitution set up a federal system with a strong central government. A federal system is one in which power is shared between a central authority and its constituent parts, with some rights reserved to each. The Constitution also called for the election of a national leader, or president.

- Two main fears shared by most Americans: one fear was that one person or group, including the majority, might become too powerful or be able to seize control of the country and create a tyranny, another fear was that the new central government might weaken or take away the power of the state governments to run their own affairs. To deal with this the Constitution specified exactly what power central government had and which power was reserved for the states.

- Representatives of various states noted that the Constitution did not have any words guaranteeing the freedoms or the basic rights and privileges of citizens. Though the Convention delegates did not think it necessary to include such explicit guarantees, many people felt that they needed further written protection against tyranny. So, a "Bill of Rights" was added to the Constitution.

# LEGISLATIVE BRUNCH

- can make federal laws, levy federal taxes, declare war or put foreign treaties into effect.

• The House of Representatives: two-year terms, each member represents a district in his state according to the population of it, 435 representatives in the United States House of Representatives.

• The Senate: six-year terms each state has two senators, only one-third of the Senate is elected every two years, experienced senators in Congress after each election.

- A bill is read, studied in committees, commented on and amended in the Senate or House chamber in which it was introduced. It is then voted upon. If it passes, it is sent to the other house where a similar procedure occurs. Members of both houses work together in "conference committees" if the chambers have passed different versions of the same bill. Groups who try to persuade Congressmen to vote for or against a bill are known as "lobbies". When both houses of Congress pass a bill on which they agree, it is sent to the president for his signature. Only after it is signed does the bill become a law.

# THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

- The chief executive is the president, who is elected to a two-year term.

- The president, as the chief formulator of public policy, can veto (forbid) any bill passed by Congress. The veto can be overridden by a two-thirds vote in both the Senate and House of Representatives. As head of his political party, with ready access to the news media, the president can easily influence public opinion regarding issues and legislation that he deems vital.

- The president is commander in chief of the armed forces.

- The major departments of the government are headed by appointed secretaries who collectively make up the president's cabinet. Each appointment must be confirmed by a vote of the Senate. Today these 13 departments are: State, Treasury, Defense, Justice, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Energy and Education.

- The president is primarily responsible for foreign relations with other nations. The president often represents the United States abroad in consultations with other heads of state, and, through his officials, he negotiates treaties with over countries. Such treaties must be approved by a two-thirds vote of the Senate. Presidents also negotiate with other nations less formal "executive agreements" that are not subject to Senate approval.

# THE JUDICIAL BRANCH

- The judicial branch is headed by the Supreme Court, which is the only court specifically created by the Constitution. In addition, the Congress has established 11 federal courts of appeal and, below them, 91 federal district courts. Federal judges are appointed for life or voluntary retirement, and can only be removed from office through the process of impeachment and trial in the Congress.

- Federal courts have jurisdiction over cases arising out of the Constitution: laws and treaties of the United States: maritime cases; issues involving foreign citizens or governments; and cases in which the federal government itself is a party.

- The Supreme Court today consists of a chief justice and eight associate justices. The Court's most important function consists of determining whether congressional legislation or executive action violates the Constitution. This power of judicial review is not specifically provided for by the Constitution.

# CHECKS AND BALANCES

• If Congress proposes a law that the president thinks is unwise, the president can veto it. That means the proposal does not become law. Congress can enact the law despite the president's views only if two-thirds of the members of both houses vote in favor of it.

• If Congress passes a law which is then challenged in the courts as unconstitutional. the Supreme Court has the power to declare the law unconstitutional and therefore no longer in effect.

• The president has the power to make treaties with other nations and to make all appointments to federal positions, including the position of Supreme Court justice. The Senate, however, must approve all treaties and confirm all appointments before they become official. In this way the Congress can prevent the president from making unwise appointments.

# BILL OF RIGHTS

- To all Americans, another basic foundation of their representative democracy is the Bill of Rights, adopted in 1791. This consists of 10 very short paragraphs, which guarantee freedom and individual rights and forbid interference with the lives of individuals by the government. Each paragraph is an Amendment to the original Constitution.

- Bill of Rights guaranteed freedom of religion, of speech and of the press. Americans have the right to assemble in public places, to protest government actions and to demand change. They have the right to own weapons if they wish. Because of the Bill of Rights, neither police nor soldiers can slop and search a person without good reason. They also cannot search a person's home without legal permission from a court to do so.

- Bill of Rights guarantees Americans the right to a speedy trial if accused of a crime. Cruel and unusual punishment is forbidden.

- 16 amendments to the Constitution as of 1991: guarantee citizenship and full rights of citizenship to all people regardless of race, gives women the right to vote and another lowered the national voting age to 18 years.