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Source:

 http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/factover *A brief history of the United States*.

The first Europeans to reach North America were Icelandic Vikings, led by Leif Ericson, about the year 1000. Traces of their visit have been found in the Canadian province of Newfoundland, but the Vikings failed to establish a permanent settlement and soon lost contact with the new continent.

Five centuries later, the demand for Asian spices, textiles, and dyes spurred European navigators to dream of shorter routes between East and West. Acting on behalf of the Spanish crown, in 1492 the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus sailed west from Europe and landed on one of the Bahama Islands in the Caribbean Sea. Within 40 years, Spanish adventurers had carved out a huge empire in Central and South America.

**THE COLONIAL ERA**

The first successful English colony was founded at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. A few years later, English Puritans came to America to escape religious persecution for their opposition to the Church of England. In 1620, the Puritans founded Plymouth Colony in what later became Massachusetts. Plymouth was the second permanent British settlement in North America and the first in New England.

In New England the Puritans hoped to build a "city upon a hill" -- an ideal community. Ever since, Americans have viewed their country as a great experiment, a worthy model for other nations to follow. The Puritans believed that government should enforce God's morality, and they strictly punished heretics, adulterers, drunks, and violators of the Sabbath. In spite of their own quest for religious freedom, the Puritans practiced a form of intolerant moralism. In 1636 an English clergyman named Roger Williams left Massachusetts and founded the colony of Rhode Island, based on the principles of religious freedom and separation of church and state, two ideals that were later adopted by framers of the U.S. Constitution.

Colonists arrived from other European countries, but the English were far better established in America. By 1733 English settlers had founded 13 colonies along the Atlantic Coast, from New Hampshire in the North to Georgia in the South. Elsewhere in North America, the French controlled Canada and Louisiana, which included the vast Mississippi River watershed. France and England fought several wars during the 18th century, with North America being drawn into every one. The end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 left England in control of Canada and all of North America east of the Mississippi.

Soon afterwards England and its colonies were in conflict. The mother country imposed new taxes, in part to defray the cost of fighting the Seven Years' War, and expected Americans to lodge British soldiers in their homes. The colonists resented the taxes and resisted the quartering of soldiers. Insisting that they could be taxed only by their own colonial assemblies, the colonists rallied behind the slogan "no taxation without representation."

All the taxes, except one on tea, were removed, but in 1773 a group of patriots responded by staging the Boston Tea Party. Disguised as Indians, they boarded British merchant ships and dumped 342 crates of tea into Boston harbor. This provoked a crackdown by the British Parliament, including the closing of Boston harbor to shipping. Colonial leaders convened the First Continental Congress in 1774 to discuss the colonies' opposition to British rule. War broke out on April 19, 1775, when British soldiers confronted colonial rebels in Lexington, Massachusetts. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress adopted a Declaration of Independence.

At first the Revolutionary War went badly for the Americans. With few provisions and little training, American troops generally fought well, but were outnumbered and overpowered by the British. The turning point in the war came in 1777 when American soldiers defeated the British Army at Saratoga, New York. France had secretly been aiding the Americans, but was reluctant to ally itself openly until they had proved themselves in battle. Following the Americans' victory at Saratoga, France and America signed treaties of alliance, and France provided the Americans with troops and warships.

The last major battle of the American Revolution took place at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. A combined force of American and French troops surrounded the British and forced their surrender. Fighting continued in some areas for two more years, and the war officially ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, by which England recognized American independence.

**A NEW NATION**

The framing of the U.S. Constitution and the creation of the United States are covered in more detail in chapter 4. In essence, the Constitution alleviated Americans' fear of excessive central power by dividing government into three branches -- legislative (Congress), executive (the president and the federal agencies), and judicial (the federal courts) -- and by including 10 amendments known as the Bill of Rights to safeguard individual liberties. Continued uneasiness about the accumulation of power manifested itself in the differing political philosophies of two towering figures from the Revolutionary period. George Washington, the war's military hero and the first U.S. president, headed a party favoring a strong president and central government; Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, headed a party preferring to allot more power to the states, on the theory that they would be more accountable to the people.

Jefferson became the third president in 1801. Although he had intended to limit the president's power, political realities dictated otherwise. Among other forceful actions, in 1803 he purchased the vast Louisiana Territory from France, almost doubling the size of the United States. The Louisiana Purchase added more than 2 million square kilometers of territory and extended the country's borders as far west as the Rocky Mountains in Colorado.

**SLAVERY AND THE CIVIL WAR**

In the first quarter of the 19th century, the frontier of settlement moved west to the Mississippi River and beyond. In 1828 Andrew Jackson became the first "outsider" elected president: a man from the frontier state of Tennessee, born into a poor family and outside the cultural traditions of the Atlantic seaboard.

Although on the surface the Jacksonian Era was one of optimism and energy, the young nation was entangled in a contradiction. The ringing words of the Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal," were meaningless for 1.5 million slaves. (For more on slavery and its aftermath, see chapters 1 and 4.)

In 1820 southern and northern politicians debated the question of whether slavery would be legal in the western territories. Congress reached a compromise: Slavery was permitted in the new state of Missouri and the Arkansas Territory but barred everywhere west and north of Missouri. The outcome of the Mexican War of 1846-48 brought more territory into American hands -- and with it the issue of whether to extend slavery. Another compromise, in 1850, admitted California as a free state, with the citizens of Utah and New Mexico being allowed to decide whether they wanted slavery within their borders or not (they did not).

But the issue continued to rankle. After Abraham Lincoln, a foe of slavery, was elected president in 1860, 11 states left the Union and proclaimed themselves an independent nation, the Confederate States of America: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina. The American Civil War had begun.

The Confederate Army did well in the early part of the war, and some of its commanders, especially General Robert E. Lee, were brilliant tacticians. But the Union had superior manpower and resources to draw upon. In the summer of 1863 Lee took a gamble by marching his troops north into Pennsylvania. He met a Union army at Gettysburg, and the largest battle ever fought on American soil ensued. After three days of desperate fighting, the Confederates were defeated. At the same time, on the Mississippi River, Union General Ulysses S. Grant captured the city of Vicksburg, giving the North control of the entire Mississippi Valley and splitting the Confederacy in two.

Two years later, after a long campaign involving forces commanded by Lee and Grant, the Confederates surrendered. The Civil War was the most traumatic episode in American history. But it resolved two matters that had vexed Americans since 1776. It put an end to slavery, and it decided that the country was not a collection of semi-independent states but an indivisible whole.

**THE LATE 19TH CENTURY**

Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, depriving America of a leader uniquely qualified by background and temperament to heal the wounds left by the Civil War. His successor, Andrew Johnson, was a southerner who had remained loyal to the Union during the war. Northern members of Johnson's own party (Republican) set in motion a process to remove him from office for allegedly acting too leniently toward former Confederates. Johnson's acquittal was an important victory for the principle of separation of powers: A president should not be removed from office because Congress disagrees with his policies, but only if he has committed, in the words of the Constitution, "treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

Within a few years after the end of the Civil War, the United States became a leading industrial power, and shrewd businessmen made great fortunes. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; by 1900 the United States had more rail mileage than all of Europe. The petroleum industry prospered, and John D. Rockefeller of the Standard Oil Company became one of the richest men in America. Andrew Carnegie, who started out as a poor Scottish immigrant, built a vast empire of steel mills. Textile mills multiplied in the South, and meat-packing plants sprang up in Chicago, Illinois. An electrical industry flourished as Americans made use of a series of inventions: the telephone, the light bulb, the phonograph, the alternating-current motor and transformer, motion pictures. In Chicago, architect Louis Sullivan used steel-frame construction to fashion America's distinctive contribution to the modern city: the skyscraper.

But unrestrained economic growth brought dangers. To limit competition, railroads merged and set standardized shipping rates. Trusts -- huge combinations of corporations -- tried to establish monopoly control over some industries, notably oil. These giant enterprises could produce goods efficiently and sell them cheaply, but they could also fix prices and destroy competitors. To counteract them, the federal government took action. The Interstate Commerce Commission was created in 1887 to control railroad rates. The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 banned trusts, mergers, and business agreements "in restraint of trade."

Industrialization brought with it the rise of organized labor. The American Federation of Labor, founded in 1886, was a coalition of trade unions for skilled laborers. The late 19th century was a period of heavy immigration, and many of the workers in the new industries were foreign-born. For American farmers, however, times were hard. Food prices were falling, and farmers had to bear the costs of high shipping rates, expensive mortgages, high taxes, and tariffs on consumer goods.

With the exception of the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, American territory had remained fixed since 1848. In the 1890s a new spirit of expansion took hold. The United States followed the lead of northern European nations in asserting a duty to "civilize" the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. After American newspapers published lurid accounts of atrocities in the Spanish colony of Cuba, the United States and Spain went to war in 1898. When the war was over, the United States had gained a number of possessions from Spain: Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. In an unrelated action, the United States also acquired the Hawaiian Islands.

Yet Americans, who had themselves thrown off the shackles of empire, were not comfortable with administering one. In 1902 American troops left Cuba, although the new republic was required to grant naval bases to the United States. The Philippines obtained limited self-government in 1907 and complete independence in 1946. Puerto Rico became a self-governing commonwealth within the United States, and Hawaii became a state in 1959 (as did Alaska).

**THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT**

While Americans were venturing abroad, they were also taking a fresh look at social problems at home. Despite the signs of prosperity, up to half of all industrial workers still lived in poverty. New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco could be proud of their museums, universities, and public libraries -- and ashamed of their slums. The prevailing economic dogma had been laissez faire: let the government interfere with commerce as little as possible. About 1900 the Progressive Movement arose to reform society and individuals through government action. The movement's supporters were primarily economists, sociologists, technicians, and civil servants who sought scientific, cost-effective solutions to political problems.

Social workers went into the slums to establish settlement houses, which provided the poor with health services and recreation. Prohibitionists demanded an end to the sale of liquor, partly to prevent the suffering that alcoholic husbands inflicted on their wives and children. In the cities, reform politicians fought corruption, regulated public transportation, and built municipally owned utilities. States passed laws restricting child labor, limiting workdays, and providing compensation for injured workers.

Some Americans favored more radical ideologies. The Socialist Party, led by Eugene V. Debs, advocated a peaceful, democratic transition to a state-run economy. But socialism never found a solid footing in the United States -- the party's best showing in a presidential race was 6 percent of the vote in 1912.

**WAR AND PEACE**

When World War I erupted in Europe in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson urged a policy of strict American neutrality. Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare against all ships bound for Allied ports undermined that position. When Congress declared war on Germany in 1917, the American army was a force of only 200,000 soldiers. Millions of men had to be drafted, trained, and shipped across the submarine-infested Atlantic. A full year passed before the U.S. Army was ready to make a significant contribution to the war effort.

By the fall of 1918, Germany's position had become hopeless. Its armies were retreating in the face of a relentless American buildup. In October Germany asked for peace, and an armistice was declared on November 11. In 1919 Wilson himself went to Versailles to help draft the peace treaty. Although he was cheered by crowds in the Allied capitals, at home his international outlook was less popular. His idea of a League of Nations was included in the Treaty of Versailles, but the U.S. Senate did not ratify the treaty, and the United States did not participate in the league.

The majority of Americans did not mourn the defeated treaty. They turned inward, and the United States withdrew from European affairs. At the same time, Americans were becoming hostile to foreigners in their midst. In 1919 a series of terrorist bombings produced the "Red Scare." Under the authority of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, political meetings were raided and several hundred foreign-born political radicals were deported, even though most of them were innocent of any crime. In 1921 two Italian-born anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were convicted of murder on the basis of shaky evidence. Intellectuals protested, but in 1927 the two men were electrocuted. Congress enacted immigration limits in 1921 and tightened them further in 1924 and 1929. These restrictions favored immigrants from Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries.

The 1920s were an extraordinary and confusing time, when hedonism coexisted with puritanical conservatism. It was the age of Prohibition: In 1920 a constitutional amendment outlawed the sale of alcoholic beverages. Yet drinkers cheerfully evaded the law in thousands of "speakeasies" (illegal bars), and gangsters made illicit fortunes in liquor. It was also the Roaring Twenties, the age of jazz and spectacular silent movies and such fads as flagpole-sitting and goldfish-swallowing. The Ku Klux Klan, a racist organization born in the South after the Civil War, attracted new followers and terrorized blacks, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. At the same time, a Catholic, New York Governor Alfred E. Smith, was a Democratic candidate for president.

For big business, the 1920s were golden years. The United States was now a consumer society, with booming markets for radios, home appliances, synthetic textiles, and plastics. One of the most admired men of the decade was Henry Ford, who had introduced the assembly line into automobile factories. Ford could pay high wages and still earn enormous profits by mass-producing the Model T, a car that millions of buyers could afford. For a moment, it seemed that Americans had the Midas touch.

But the superficial prosperity masked deep problems. With profits soaring and interest rates low, plenty of money was available for investment. Much of it, however, went into reckless speculation in the stock market. Frantic bidding pushed prices far above stock shares' real value. Investors bought stocks "on margin," borrowing up to 90 percent of the purchase price. The bubble burst in 1929. The stock market crashed, triggering a worldwide depression.

**THE GREAT DEPRESSION**

By 1932 thousands of American banks and over 100,000 businesses had failed. Industrial production was cut in half, wages had decreased 60 percent, and one out of every four workers was unemployed. That year Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president on the platform of "a New Deal for the American people."

Roosevelt's jaunty self-confidence galvanized the nation. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he said at his inauguration. He followed up these words with decisive action. Within three months -- the historic "Hundred Days" -- Roosevelt had rushed through Congress a great number of laws to help the economy recover. Such new agencies as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration created millions of jobs by undertaking the construction of roads, bridges, airports, parks, and public buildings. Later the Social Security Act set up contributory old-age and survivors' pensions.

Roosevelt's New Deal programs did not end the Depression. Although the economy improved, full recovery had to await the defense buildup preceding America's entry into World War II.

**WORLD WAR II**

Again neutrality was the initial American response to the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939. But the bombing of Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii by the Japanese in December 1941 brought the United States into the war, first against Japan and then against its allies, Germany and Italy.

American, British, and Soviet war planners agreed to concentrate on defeating Germany first. British and American forces landed in North Africa in November 1942, proceeded to Sicily and the Italian mainland in 1943, and liberated Rome on June 4, 1944. Two days later -- D-Day -- Allied forces landed in Normandy. Paris was liberated on August 24, and by September American units had crossed the German border. The Germans finally surrendered on May 5, 1945.

The war against Japan came to a swift end in August of 1945, when President Harry Truman ordered the use of atomic bombs against the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nearly 200,000 civilians were killed. Although the matter can still provoke heated discussion, the argument in favor of dropping the bombs was that casualties on both sides would have been greater if the Allies had been forced to invade Japan.

**THE COLD WAR**

A new international congress, the United Nations, came into being after the war, and this time the United States joined. Soon tensions developed between the United States and its wartime ally the Soviet Union. Although Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had promised to support free elections in all the liberated nations of Europe, Soviet forces imposed Communist dictatorships in eastern Europe. Germany became a divided country, with a western zone under joint British, French, and American occupation and an eastern zone under Soviet occupation. In the spring of 1948 the Soviets sealed off West Berlin in an attempt to starve the isolated city into submission. The western powers responded with a massive airlift of food and fuel until the Soviets lifted the blockade in May 1949. A month earlier the United States had allied with Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

On June 25, 1950, armed with Soviet weapons and acting with Stalin's approval, North Korea's army invaded South Korea. Truman immediately secured a commitment from the United Nations to defend South Korea. The war lasted three years, and the final settlement left Korea divided.

Soviet control of eastern Europe, the Korean War, and the Soviet development of atomic and hydrogen bombs instilled fear in Americans. Some believed that the nation's new vulnerability was the work of traitors from within. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy asserted in the early 1950s that the State Department and the U.S. Army were riddled with Communists. McCarthy was eventually discredited. In the meantime, however, careers had been destroyed, and the American people had all but lost sight of a cardinal American virtue: toleration of political dissent.

From 1945 until 1970 the United States enjoyed a long period of economic growth, interrupted only by mild and brief recessions. For the first time a majority of Americans enjoyed a comfortable standard of living. In 1960, 55 percent of all households owned washing machines, 77 percent owned cars, 90 percent had television sets, and nearly all had refrigerators. At the same time, the nation was moving slowly to establish racial justice.

In 1960 John F. Kennedy was elected president. Young, energetic, and handsome, he promised to "get the country moving again" after the eight-year presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the aging World War II general. In October 1962 Kennedy was faced with what turned out to be the most drastic crisis of the Cold War. The Soviet Union had been caught installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, close enough to reach American cities in a matter of minutes. Kennedy imposed a naval blockade on the island. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushschev ultimately agreed to remove the missiles, in return for an American promise not to invade Cuba.

In April 1961 the Soviets capped a series of triumphs in space by sending the first man into orbit around the Earth. President Kennedy responded with a promise that Americans would walk on the moon before the decade was over. This promise was fulfilled in July of 1969, when astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped out of the Apollo 11 spacecraft and onto the moon's surface.

Kennedy did not live to see this culmination. He had been assassinated in 1963. He was not a universally popular president, but his death was a terrible shock to the American people. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, managed to push through Congress a number of new laws establishing social programs. Johnson's "War on Poverty" included preschool education for poor children, vocational training for dropouts from school, and community service for slum youths.

During his six years in office, Johnson became preoccupied with the Vietnam War. By 1968, 500,000 American troops were fighting in that small country, previously little known to most of them. Although politicians tended to view the war as part of a necessary effort to check communism on all fronts, a growing number of Americans saw no vital American interest in what happened to Vietnam. Demonstrations protesting American involvement broke out on college campuses, and there were violent clashes between students and police. Antiwar sentiment spilled over into a wide range of protests against injustice and discrimination.

Stung by his increasing unpopularity, Johnson decided not to run for a second full term. Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968. He pursued a policy of Vietnamization, gradually replacing American soldiers with Vietnamese. In 1973 he signed a peace treaty with North Vietnam and brought American soldiers home. Nixon achieved two other diplomatic breakthroughs: re-establishing U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China and negotiating the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with the Soviet Union. In 1972 he easily won re-election.

During that presidential campaign, however, five men had been arrested for breaking into Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate office building in Washington, D.C. Journalists investigating the incident discovered that the burglars had been employed by Nixon's re-election committee. The White House made matters worse by trying to conceal its connection with the break-in. Eventually, tape recordings made by the president himself revealed that he had been involved in the cover-up. By the summer of 1974, it was clear that Congress was about to impeach and convict him. On August 9, Richard Nixon became the only U.S. president to resign from office.

**DECADES OF CHANGE**

After World War II the presidency had alternated between Democrats and Republicans, but, for the most part, Democrats had held majorities in the Congress -- in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. A string of 26 consecutive years of Democratic control was broken in 1980, when the Republicans gained a majority in the Senate; at the same time, Republican Ronald Reagan was elected president. This change marked the onset of a volatility that has characterized American voting patterns ever since.

Whatever their attitudes toward Reagan's policies, most Americans credited him with a capacity for instilling pride in their country and a sense of optimism about the future. If there was a central theme to his domestic policies, it was that the federal government had become too big and federal taxes too high.

Despite a growing federal budget deficit, in 1983 the U.S. economy entered into one of the longest periods of sustained growth since World War II. The Reagan administration suffered a defeat in the 1986 elections, however, when Democrats regained control of the Senate. The most serious issue of the day was the revelation that the United States had secretly sold arms to Iran in an attempt to win freedom for American hostages held in Lebanon and to finance antigovernment forces in Nicaragua at a time when Congress had prohibited such aid. Despite these revelations, Reagan continued to enjoy strong popularity throughout his second term in office.

His successor in 1988, Republican George Bush, benefited from Reagan's popularity and continued many of his policies. When Iraq invaded oil-rich Kuwait in 1990, Bush put together a multinational coalition that liberated Kuwait early in 1991.

By 1992, however, the American electorate had become restless again. Voters elected Bill Clinton, a Democrat, president, only to turn around two years later and give Republicans their first majority in both the House and Senate in 40 years. Meanwhile, several perennial debates had broken out anew -- between advocates of a strong federal government and believers in decentralization of power, between advocates of prayer in public schools and defenders of separation of church and state, between those who emphasize swift and sure punishment of criminals and those who seek to address the underlying causes of crime. Complaints about the influence of money on political campaigns inspired a movement to limit the number of terms elected officials could serve. This and other discontents with the system led to the formation of the strongest Third-Party movement in generations, led by Texas businessman H. Ross Perot.

Although the economy was strong in the mid-1990s, two phenomena were troubling many Americans. Corporations were resorting more and more to a process known as downsizing: trimming the work force to cut costs despite the hardships this inflicted on workers. And in many industries the gap between the annual compensations of corporate executives and common laborers had become enormous. Even the majority of Americans who enjoy material comfort worry about a perceived decline in the quality of life, in the strength of the family, in neighborliness and civility. Americans probably remain the most optimistic people in the world, but with the century drawing to a close, opinion polls showed that trait in shorter supply than usual.

*Geography and regional characteristics.*

The USA stretches from the heavily industrialized, metropolitan Atlantic coast, across the rich farms of the Great Plains, over the Appalachian and the Rocky Mountains to the densely populated West coast. Alaska and the island state of Hawaii are detached from the main mid-continental group of 48 states. America is the land of physical contrasts, including the weather. Most of the USA is the temperate zone with four distinct seasons, while the northern states and Alaska have extremely cold winters, and the southern parts of Florida, Texas, California have warm weather year round.

The area of the United States is 9 629 091 square km.

The United States is the land of bountiful rivers and lakes. Minnesota is the land of 10.000 lakes. The Mississippi River runs nearly 6 thousand km from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The St. Lawrence Seaway connects the Great lakes with the Atlantic Ocean.

Underground, a wealth of minerals provides a solid base for American industry. History has glamorized the gold rushes of California and Alaska and the silver finds in Nevada.

1. **Location:**

North America, bordering both the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Pacific Ocean, between Canada and Mexico

**Map references:** North America

**Area:**

**total area:** 9,372,610 sq km

**land area:** 9,166,600 sq km

**comparative area:** about half the size of Russia; about three-tenths the size of Africa; about one-half the size of South America (or slightly larger than Brazil); slightly smaller than China; about two and one-half times the size of Western Europe

**note:** includes only the 50 states and District of Columbia

**Land boundaries:** total 12,248 km, Canada 8,893 km (including 2,477 km with Alaska), Cuba 29 km (US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay), Mexico 3,326 km

**Coastline:** 19,924 km

**Climate:** mostly temperate, but tropical in Hawaii and Florida and arctic in Alaska, semiarid in the great plains west of the Mississippi River and arid in the Great Basin of the southwest; low winter temperatures in the northwest are ameliorated occasionally in January and February by warm chinook winds from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains

**Terrain:** vast central plain, mountains in west, hills and low mountains in east; rugged mountains and broad river valleys in Alaska; rugged, volcanic topography in Hawaii

**Natural resources:** coal, copper, lead, molybdenum, phosphates, uranium, bauxite, gold, iron, mercury, nickel, potash, silver, tungsten, zinc, petroleum, natural gas, timber

**Land use:** arable land:20%, permanent crops: 0%, meadows and pastures: 26%, forest and woodland: 29%, other: 25%, irrigated land:181,020 sq km (1989 est.)

**Environment:**

**current issues:** air pollution resulting in acid rain in both the US and Canada; the US is the largest single emitter of carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels; water pollution from runoff of pesticides and fertilizers; very limited natural fresh water resources in much of the western part of the country require careful management; desertification.

**natural hazards:** tsunamis, volcanoes, and earthquake activity around Pacific Basin; hurricanes along the Atlantic coast; tornadoes in the midwest; mudslides in California; forest fires in the west; flooding; permafrost in northern Alaska is a major impediment to development

**international agreements:** party to - Air Pollution, Air Pollution-Nitrogen Oxides, Antarctic Treaty, Climate Change, Endangered Species, Environmental Modification, Marine Dumping, Marine Life Conservation, Nuclear Test Ban, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Wetlands, Whaling; signed, but not ratified - Air Pollution-Volatile Organic Compounds, Antarctic-Environmental Protocol, Biodiversity, Desertification, Hazardous Wastes, Tropical Timber 94

**Note:** world's fourth-largest country (after Russia, Canada, and China)

Traditionally the USA is divided into several regions:

1. **New England**, made up of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.
2. **The Middle Atlantic**, comprising New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland.
3. **The South**, which runs from Virginia south to Florida and west as far as central Texas. This region also includes West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and parts of Missouri and Oklahoma.
4. **The Midwest**, a broad collection of states sweeping westward from Ohio to Nebraska and including Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, parts of Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, and eastern Colorado.
5. **The Southwest**, made up of western Texas, portions of Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and the southern interior part of California.
6. **The West**, comprising Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, California, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and Hawaii.

Note that there is nothing official about these regions; many other lineups are possible. These groupings are offered simply as a way to begin the otherwise daunting task of getting acquainted with the United States.

**REGIONAL VARIETY**

How much sense does it make to talk about American regions when practically all Americans can watch the same television shows and go to the same fast-food restaurants for dinner? One way to answer the question is by giving examples of lingering regional differences.

Consider the food Americans eat. Most of it is standard wherever you go. A person can buy packages of frozen peas bearing the same label in Idaho, Missouri, and Virginia. Cereals, candy bars, and many other items also come in identical packages from Alaska to Florida. Generally, the quality of fresh fruits and vegetables does not vary much from one state to the next. On the other hand, it would be unusual to be served hush puppies (a kind of fried dough) or grits (boiled and ground corn prepared in a variety of ways) in Massachusetts or Illinois, but normal to get them in Georgia. Other regions have similar favorites that are hard to find elsewhere.

While American English is generally standard, American *speech* often differs according to what part of the country you are in. Southerners tend to speak slowly, in what is referred to as a "Southern drawl." Midwesterners use "flat" a's (as in "bad" or "cat"), and the New York City patois features a number of Yiddish words ("schlepp," "nosh," "nebbish") contributed by the city's large Jewish population.

Regional differences also make themselves felt in less tangible ways, such as attitudes and outlooks. An example is the attention paid to foreign events in newspapers. In the East, where people look out across the Atlantic Ocean, papers tend to show greatest concern with what is happening in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and western Asia. On the West Coast, news editors give more attention to events in East Asia and Australia.

To understand regional differences more fully, let's take a closer look at the regions themselves.

**NEW ENGLAND**

The smallest region, New England has not been blessed with large expanses of rich farmland or a mild climate. Yet it played a dominant role in American development. From the 17th century until well into the 19th, New England was the country's cultural and economic center.

The earliest European settlers of New England were English Protestants of firm and settled doctrine. Many of them came in search of religious liberty. They gave the region its distinctive political format -- the town meeting (an outgrowth of meetings held by church elders) in which citizens gathered to discuss issues of the day. Only men of property could vote. Nonetheless, town meetings afforded New Englanders an unusually high level of participation in government. Such meetings still function in many New England communities today.

New Englanders found it difficult to farm the land in large lots, as was common in the South. By 1750, many settlers had turned to other pursuits. The mainstays of the region became shipbuilding, fishing, and trade. In their business dealings, New Englanders gained a reputation for hard work, shrewdness, thrift, and ingenuity.

These traits came in handy as the Industrial Revolution reached America in the first half of the 19th century. In Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, new factories sprang up to manufacture such goods as clothing, rifles, and clocks. Most of the money to run these businesses came from Boston, which was the financial heart of the nation.

New England also supported a vibrant cultural life. The critic Van Wyck Brooks called the creation of a distinctive American literature in the first half of the 19th century "the flowering of New England." Education is another of the region's strongest legacies. Its cluster of top-ranking universities and colleges -- including Harvard, Yale, Brown, Dartmouth, Wellesley, Smith, Mt. Holyoke, Williams, Amherst, and Wesleyan -- is unequaled by any other region.

As some of the original New England settlers migrated westward, immigrants from Canada, Ireland, Italy, and eastern Europe moved into the region. Despite a changing population, much of the original spirit of New England remains. It can be seen in the simple, woodframe houses and white church steeples that are features of many small towns, and in the traditional lighthouses that dot the Atlantic coast.

In the 20th century, most of New England's traditional industries have relocated to states or foreign countries where goods can be made more cheaply. In more than a few factory towns, skilled workers have been left without jobs. The gap has been partly filled by the microelectronics and computer industries.

**MIDDLE ATLANTIC**

If New England provided the brains and dollars for 19th-century American expansion, the Middle Atlantic states provided the muscle. The region's largest states, New York and Pennsylvania, became centers of heavy industry (iron, glass, and steel).

The Middle Atlantic region was settled by a wider range of people than New England. Dutch immigrants moved into the lower Hudson River Valley in what is now New York State. Swedes went to Delaware. English Catholics founded Maryland, and an English Protestant sect, the Friends (Quakers), settled Pennsylvania. In time, all these settlements fell under English control, but the region continued to be a magnet for people of diverse nationalities.

Early settlers were mostly farmers and traders, and the region served as a bridge between North and South. Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, midway between the northern and southern colonies, was home to the Continental Congress, the convention of delegates from the original colonies that organized the American Revolution. The same city was the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the U.S. Constitution in 1787.

As heavy industry spread throughout the region, rivers such as the Hudson and Delaware were transformed into vital shipping lanes. Cities on waterways -- New York on the Hudson, Philadelphia on the Delaware, Baltimore on Chesapeake Bay -- grew dramatically. New York is still the nation's largest city, its financial hub, and its cultural center.

Like New England, the Middle Atlantic region has seen much of its heavy industry relocate elsewhere. Other industries, such as drug manufacturing and communications, have taken up the slack.

**THE SOUTH**

The South is perhaps the most distinctive and colorful American region. The American Civil War (1861-65) devastated the South socially and economically. Nevertheless, it retained its unmistakable identity.

Like New England, the South was first settled by English Protestants. But whereas New Englanders tended to stress their differences from the old country, Southerners tended to emulate the English. Even so, Southerners were prominent among the leaders of the American Revolution, and four of America's first five presidents were Virginians. After 1800, however, the interests of the manufacturing North and the agrarian South began to diverge.

Especially in coastal areas, southern settlers grew wealthy by raising and selling cotton and tobacco. The most economical way to raise these crops was on large farms, called plantations, which required the work of many laborers. To supply this need, plantation owners relied on slaves brought from Africa, and slavery spread throughout the South.

Slavery was the most contentious issue dividing North and South. To northerners it was immoral; to southerners it was integral to their way of life. In 1860, 11 southern states left the Union intending to form a separate nation, the Confederate States of America. This rupture led to the Civil War, the Confederacy's defeat, and the end of slavery. (For more on the Civil War, see chapter 3.) The scars left by the war took decades to heal. The abolition of slavery failed to provide African Americans with political or economic equality: Southern towns and cities legalized and refined the practice of racial segregation.

It took a long, concerted effort by African Americans and their supporters to end segregation. In the meantime, however, the South could point with pride to a 20th-century regional outpouring of literature by, among others, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor.

As southerners, black and white, shook off the effects of slavery and racial division, a new regional pride expressed itself under the banner of "the New South" and in such events as the annual Spoleto Music Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, and the 1996 summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia. Today the South has evolved into a manufacturing region, and high-rise buildings crowd the skylines of such cities as Atlanta and Little Rock, Arkansas. Owing to its mild weather, the South has become a mecca for retirees from other U.S. regions and from Canada.

**THE MIDWEST**

The Midwest is a cultural crossroads. Starting in the early 1800s easterners moved there in search of better farmland, and soon Europeans bypassed the East Coast to migrate directly to the interior: Germans to eastern Missouri, Swedes and Norwegians to Wisconsin and Minnesota. The region's fertile soil made it possible for farmers to produce abundant harvests of cereal crops such as wheat, oats, and corn. The region was soon known as the nation's "breadbasket."

Most of the Midwest is flat. The Mississippi River has acted as a regional lifeline, moving settlers to new homes and foodstuffs to market. The river inspired two classic American books, both written by a native Missourian, Samuel Clemens, who took the pseudonym Mark Twain: *Life on the Mississippi* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Midwesterners are praised as being open, friendly, and straightforward. Their politics tend to be cautious, but the caution is sometimes peppered with protest. The Midwest gave birth to one of America's two major political parties, the Republican Party, which was formed in the 1850s to oppose the spread of slavery into new states. At the turn of the century, the region also spawned the Progressive Movement, which largely consisted of farmers and merchants intent on making government less corrupt and more receptive to the will of the people. Perhaps because of their geographic location, many midwesterners have been strong adherents of isolationism, the belief that Americans should not concern themselves with foreign wars and problems.

The region's hub is Chicago, Illinois, the nation's third largest city. This major Great Lakes port is a connecting point for rail lines and air traffic to far-flung parts of the nation and the world. At its heart stands the Sears Tower, at 447 meters, the world's tallest building.

**THE SOUTHWEST**

The Southwest differs from the adjoining Midwest in weather (drier), population (less dense), and ethnicity (strong Spanish-American and Native-American components). Outside the cities, the region is a land of open spaces, much of which is desert. The magnificent Grand Canyon is located in this region, as is Monument Valley, the starkly beautiful backdrop for many western movies. Monument Valley is within the Navajo Reservation, home of the most populous American Indian tribe. To the south and east lie dozens of other Indian reservations, including those of the Hopi, Zuni, and Apache tribes.

Parts of the Southwest once belonged to Mexico. The United States obtained this land following the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. Its Mexican heritage continues to exert a strong influence on the region, which is a convenient place to settle for immigrants (legal or illegal) from farther south. The regional population is growing rapidly, with Arizona in particular rivaling the southern states as a destination for retired Americans in search of a warm climate.

Population growth in the hot, arid Southwest has depended on two human artifacts: the dam and the air conditioner. Dams on the Colorado and other rivers and aqueducts such as those of the Central Arizona Project have brought water to once-small towns such as Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; and Albuquerque, New Mexico, allowing them to become metropolises. Las Vegas is renowned as one of the world's centers for gambling, while Santa Fe, New Mexico, is famous as a center for the arts, especially painting, sculpture, and opera. Another system of dams and irrigation projects waters the Central Valley of California, which is noted for producing large harvests of fruits and vegetables.

**THE WEST**

Americans have long regarded the West as the last frontier. Yet California has a history of European settlement older than that of most midwestern states. Spanish priests founded missions along the California coast a few years before the outbreak of the American Revolution. In the 19th century, California and Oregon entered the Union ahead of many states to the east.

The West is a region of scenic beauty on a grand scale. All of its 11 states are partly mountainous, and the ranges are the sources of startling contrasts. To the west of the peaks, winds from the Pacific Ocean carry enough moisture to keep the land well-watered. To the east, however, the land is very dry. Parts of western Washington State, for example, receive 20 times the amount of rain that falls on the eastern side of the state's Cascade Range.

In much of the West the population is sparse, and the federal government owns and manages millions of hectares of undeveloped land. Americans use these areas for recreational and commercial activities, such as fishing, camping, hiking, boating, grazing, lumbering, and mining. In recent years some local residents who earn their livelihoods on federal land have come into conflict with the land's managers, who are required to keep land use within environmentally acceptable limits.

Alaska, the northernmost state in the Union, is a vast land of few, but hardy, people and great stretches of wilderness, protected in national parks and wildlife refuges. Hawaii is the only state in the union in which Asian Americans outnumber residents of European stock. Beginning in the 1980s large numbers of Asians have also settled in California, mainly around Los Angeles.

Los Angeles -- and Southern California as a whole -- bears the stamp of its large Mexican-American population. Now the second largest city in the nation, Los Angeles is best known as the home of the Hollywood film industry. Fueled by the growth of Los Angeles and the "Silicon Valley" area near San Jose, California has become the most populous of all the states.

Western cities are known for their tolerance. Perhaps because so many westerners have moved there from other regions to make a new start, as a rule interpersonal relations are marked by a live-and-let-live attitude. The western economy is varied. California, for example, is both an agricultural state and a high-technology manufacturing state.

**THE FRONTIER SPIRIT**

One final American region deserves mention. It is not a fixed place but a moving zone, as well as a state of mind: the border between settlements and wilderness known as the frontier. Writing in the 1890s, historian Frederick Jackson Turner claimed that the availability of vacant land throughout much of the nation's history has shaped American attitudes and institutions. "This perennial rebirth," he wrote, "this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."

Numerous present-day American values and attitudes can be traced to the frontier past: self-reliance, resourcefulness, comradeship, a strong sense of equality. After the Civil War a large number of black Americans moved west in search of equal opportunities, and many of them gained some fame and fortune as cowboys, miners, and prairie settlers. In 1869 the western territory of Wyoming became the first place that allowed women to vote and to hold elected office.

Because the resources of the West seemed limitless, people developed wasteful attitudes and practices. The great herds of buffalo (American bison) were slaughtered until only fragments remained, and many other species were driven to the brink of extinction. Rivers were dammed and their natural communities disrupted. Forests were destroyed by excess logging, and landscapes were scarred by careless mining.

A counterweight to the abuse of natural resources took form in the American conservation movement, which owes much of its success to Americans' reluctance to see frontier conditions disappear entirely from the landscape. Conservationists were instrumental in establishing the first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872, and the first national forests in the 1890s. More recently, the Endangered Species Act has helped stem the tide of extinctions.

Environmental programs can be controversial; for example, some critics believe that the Endangered Species Act hampers economic progress. But, overall, the movement to preserve America's natural endowment continues to gain strength. Its replication replication in many other countries around the world is a tribute to the lasting influence of the American frontier.

*A responsive government.*

 *Separation of powers and the democratic process*.

The early American way of life encouraged democracy. The colonists were inhabiting a land of forest and wilderness. They had to work together to build shelter, provide food, and clear the land for farms and dwellings. This need for cooperation strengthened the belief that, in the New World, people should be on an equal footing, with nobody having special privileges.

The urge for equality affected the original 13 colonies' relations with the mother country, England. The Declaration of Independence in 1776 proclaimed that all men are created equal, that all have the right to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

The Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution after it, combined America's colonial experience with the political thought of such philosophers as England's John Locke to produce the concept of a democratic republic. The government would draw its power from the people themselves and exercise it through their elected representatives. During the Revolutionary War, the colonies had formed a national congress to present England with a united front. Under an agreement known as the Articles of Confederation, a postwar congress was allowed to handle only problems that were beyond the capabilities of individual states.

**THE CONSTITUTION**

The Articles of Confederation failed as a governing document for the United States because the states did not cooperate as expected. When it came time to pay wages to the national army or the war debt to France, some states refused to contribute. To cure this weakness, the congress asked each state to send a delegate to a convention. The so-called Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in May of 1787, with George Washington presiding.

The delegates struck a balance between those who wanted a strong central government and those who did not. The resulting master plan, or Constitution, set up a system in which some powers were given to the national, or federal, government, while others were reserved for the states. The Constitution divided the national government into three parts, or branches: the legislative (the Congress, which consists of a House of Representatives and a Senate), the executive (headed by the president), and the judicial (the federal courts). Called "separation of powers," this division gives each branch certain duties and substantial independence from the others. It also gives each branch some authority over the others through a system of "checks and balances."

Here are a few examples of how checks and balances work in practice.

1. If Congress passes a proposed law, or "bill," that the president considers unwise, he can veto it. That means that the bill is dead unless two-thirds of the members of both the House and the Senate vote to enact it despite the president's veto.
2. If Congress passes, and the president signs, a law that is challenged in the federal courts as contrary to the Constitution, the courts can nullify that law. (The federal courts cannot issue advisory or theoretical opinions, however; their jurisdiction is limited to actual disputes.)
3. The president has the power to make treaties with other nations and to make appointments to federal positions, including judgeships. The Senate, however, must approve all treaties and confirm the appointments before they can go into effect.

Recently some observers have discerned what they see as a weakness in the tripartite system of government: a tendency toward too much checking and balancing that results in governmental stasis, or "gridlock."

**BILL OF RIGHTS**

The Constitution written in Philadelphia in 1787 could not go into effect until it was ratified by a majority of citizens in at least 9 of the then 13 U.S. states. During this ratification process, misgivings arose. Many citizens felt uneasy because the document failed to explicitly guarantee the rights of individuals. The desired language was added in 10 amendments to the Constitution, collectively known as the Bill of Rights.

The Bill of Rights guarantees Americans freedom of speech, of religion, and of the press. They have the right to assemble in public places, to protest government actions, and to demand change. There is a right to own firearms. Because of the Bill of Rights, neither police officers nor soldiers can stop and search a person without good reason. Nor can they search a person's home without permission from a court to do so. The Bill of Rights guarantees a speedy trial to anyone accused of a crime. The trial must be by jury if requested, and the accused person must be allowed representation by a lawyer and to call witnesses to speak for him or her. Cruel and unusual punishment is forbidden. With the addition of the Bill of Rights, the Constitution was ratified by all 13 states and went into effect in 1789.

Since then 17 other amendments have been added to the Constitution. Perhaps the most important of these are the Thirteenth and Fourteenth, which outlaw slavery and guarantee all citizens equal protection of the laws, and the Nineteenth, which gives women the right to vote.

The Constitution can be amended in either of two ways. Congress can propose an amendment, provided that two-thirds of the members of both the House and the Senate vote in favor of it. Or the legislatures of two-thirds of the states can call a convention to propose amendments. (This second method has never been used.) In either case a proposed amendment does not go into effect until ratified by three-fourths of the states.

**LEGISLATIVE BRANCH**

The legislative branch -- the Congress -- is made up of elected representatives from each of the 50 states. It is the only branch of U.S. government that can make federal laws, levy federal taxes, declare war, and put foreign treaties into effect.

Members of the House of Representatives are elected to two-year terms. Each member represents a district in his or her home state. The number of districts is determined by a census, which is conducted every 10 years. The most populous states are allowed more representatives than the smaller ones, some of which have only one. In all, there are 435 representatives in the House.

Senators are elected to six-year terms. Each state has two senators, regardless of population. Senators' terms are staggered, so that one-third of the Senate stands for election every two years. There are 100 senators.

To become a law, a bill must pass both the House and the Senate. After the bill is introduced in either body, it is studied by one or more committees, amended, voted out of committee, and discussed in the chamber of the House or Senate. If passed by one body, it goes to the other for consideration. When a bill passes the House and the Senate in different forms, members of both bodies meet in a "conference committee" to iron out the differences. Groups that try to persuade members of Congress to vote for or against a bill are called "lobbies." They may try to exert their influence at almost any stage of the legislative process. Once both bodies have passed the same version of a bill, it goes to the president for approval.

**EXECUTIVE BRANCH**

The chief executive of the United States is the president, who together with the vice president is elected to a four-year term. As a result of a constitutional amendment that went into effect in 1951, a president may be elected to only two terms. Other than succeeding a president who dies or is disabled, the vice president's only official duty is presiding over the Senate. The vice president may vote in the Senate only to break a tie.

The president's powers are formidable but not unlimited. As the chief formulator of national policy, the president proposes legislation to Congress. As mentioned previously, the president may veto any bill passed by Congress. The president is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The president has the authority to appoint federal judges as vacancies occur, including justices of the Supreme Court. As head of his political party, with ready access to the news media, the president can easily influence public opinion.

Within the executive branch, the president has broad powers to issue regulations and directives carrying out the work of the federal government's departments and agencies. The president appoints the heads and senior officials of those departments and agencies. Heads of the major departments, called "secretaries," are part of the president's cabinet. The majority of federal workers, however, are selected on the basis of merit, not politics.

**JUDICIAL BRANCH**

The judicial branch is headed by the U.S. Supreme Court, which is the only court specifically created by the Constitution. In addition, Congress has established 13 federal courts of appeals and, below them, about 95 federal district courts. The Supreme Court meets in Washington, D.C., and the other federal courts are located in cities throughout the United States. Federal judges are appointed for life or until they retire voluntarily; they can be removed from office only via a laborious process of impeachment and trial in the Congress.

The federal courts hear cases arising out of the Constitution and federal laws and treaties, maritime cases, cases involving foreign citizens or governments, and cases in which the federal government is itself a party.

The Supreme Court consists of a chief justice and eight associate justices. With minor exceptions, cases come to the Supreme Court on appeal from lower federal or state courts. Most of these cases involve disputes over the interpretation and constitutionality of actions taken by the executive branch and of laws passed by Congress or the states (like federal laws, state laws must be consistent with the U.S. Constitution).

**THE COURT OF LAST RESORT**

Although the three branches are said to be equal, often the Supreme Court has the last word on an issue. The courts can rule a law unconstitutional, which makes it void. Most such rulings are appealed to the Supreme Court, which is thus the final arbiter of what the Constitution means. Newspapers commonly print excerpts from the justices' opinions in important cases, and the Court's decisions are often the subject of public debate. This is as it should be: The decisions may settle longstanding controversies and can have social effects far beyond the immediate outcome. Two famous, related examples are *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka (1954).

In *Plessy* the issue was whether blacks could be required to ride in separate railroad cars from whites. The Court articulated a "separate but equal" doctrine as its basis for upholding the practice. The case sent a signal that the Court was interpreting the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments narrowly and that a widespread network of laws and custom treating blacks and whites differently would not be disturbed. One justice, John Marshall Harlan, dissented from the decision, arguing that "the Constitution is color-blind."

Almost 60 years later the Court changed its mind. In *Brown* the court held that deliberately segregated public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. Although the Court did not directly overrule its *Plessy* decision, Justice Harlan's view of the Constitution was vindicated. The 1954 ruling applied directly only to schools in the city of Topeka, Kansas, but the principle it articulated reached every public school in the nation. More than that, the case undermined segregation in all governmental endeavors and set the nation on a new course of treating all citizens alike.

The *Brown* decision caused consternation among some citizens, particularly in the South, but was eventually accepted as the law of the land. Other controversial Supreme Court decisions have not received the same degree of acceptance. In several cases between 1962 and 1985, for example, the Court decided that requiring students to pray or listen to prayer in public schools violated the Constitution's prohibition against establishing a religion. Critics of these decisions believe that the absence of prayer in public schools has contributed to a decline in American morals; they have tried to find ways to restore prayer to the schools without violating the Constitution. In *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the Court guaranteed women the right to have abortions in certain circumstances -- a decision that continues to offend those Americans who consider abortion to be murder. Because the *Roe v. Wade* decision was based on an interpretation of the Constitution, opponents have been trying to amend the Constitution to overturn it.

**POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTIONS**

Americans regularly exercise their democratic rights by voting in elections and by participating in political parties and election campaigns. Today, there are two major political parties in the United States, the Democratic and the Republican. The Democratic Party evolved from the party of Thomas Jefferson, formed before 1800. The Republican Party was established in the 1850s by Abraham Lincoln and others who opposed the expansion of slavery into new states then being admitted to the Union.

The Democratic Party is considered to be the more liberal party, and the Republican, the more conservative. Democrats generally believe that government has an obligation to provide social and economic programs for those who need them. Republicans are not necessarily opposed to such programs but believe they are too costly to taxpayers. Republicans put more emphasis on encouraging private enterprise in the belief that a strong private sector makes citizens less dependent on government.

Both major parties have supporters among a wide variety of Americans and embrace a wide range of political views. Members, and even elected officials, of one party do not necessarily agree with each other on every issue. Americans do not have to join a political party to vote or to be a candidate for public office, but running for office without the money and campaign workers a party can provide is difficult.

Minor political parties -- generally referred to as "third parties" -- occasionally form in the United States, but their candidates are rarely elected to office. Minor parties often serve, however, to call attention to an issue that is of concern to voters, but has been neglected in the political dialogue. When this happens, one or both of the major parties may address the matter, and the third party disappears.

At the national level, elections are held every two years, in even-numbered years, on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November. State and local elections often coincide with national elections, but they also are held in other years and can take place at other times of year.

Americans are free to determine how much or how little they become involved in the political process. Many citizens actively participate by working as volunteers for a candidate, by promoting a particular cause, or by running for office themselves. Others restrict their participation to voting on election day, quietly letting their democratic system work, confident that their freedoms are protected.