

# INTRODUCTION

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## The United States of America 1865–1992 – the study in context

### KEY EVENTS

**The American Civil War (1861–65)** was the outcome of the attempt by the southern states (the Confederacy, see pages 9 and 10) to establish independence from the federal government. The remaining states of the Union fought to maintain the unity of the states within the USA. The Confederacy was defeated. The Civil War destroyed the economy of the south and left a legacy of hatred and mistrust on both sides of the divide. See Chapter 1 for more information.

### KEY PLACES

**The southern states** who made up the Confederacy were Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi.

### KEY EVENTS

**Massive immigration** In 1870, the population of the USA was 39,818,449. By 1990, it had grown to 249,975,000.

This book explores the struggle for civil rights of four groups of Americans – African Americans, Trade Unions and Labour, Native Americans and Women. Whilst there are clear differences in the efforts of all four to establish their rights, each was affected by the wider context in which their campaigns took place. Some knowledge of this is, therefore, helpful to gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that promoted or inhibited their progress.

The period from 1865 until 1992 is a dynamic and challenging one in the history of the USA. In 1865, the United States of America could be described as a fledgling nation having only existed since 1783 and having just emerged from a potentially destructive **civil war** that threatened its continued existence. By 1992, the USA had become a well-established super-power on the world stage.

### The domestic front

On the domestic front, our period of study saw dramatic territorial expansion, economic growth and social change that transformed the United States of America from the original thirteen states (the former British colonies) with a predominantly white population of British origin, to a culturally and ethnically diverse nation of fifty states stretching from coast to coast. The ancestors of the native white population of the US were predominantly from Protestant sects that had migrated to the US in the seventeenth century to escape persecution, Puritans and Quakers, for example. This is especially true of those living in the northern, east coast states (e.g. Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania). In some instances, these were intolerant of other faiths, particularly Roman Catholicism and Judaism. Their beliefs also influenced their attitudes to many aspects of life such as issues of morality, home and family. The influx of significant numbers of Roman

Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Italy, along with the Jewish communities from Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contributed significantly to native white hostility. The emancipation of the black slave population in the southern states of the US after 1863, together with massive immigration before 1929 which brought greater religious as well as cultural diversity, challenged the existing native white population and the government of the USA to address the principles of freedom and equality that were embodied in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. This underpinned the original US Constitution and Bill of Rights drawn up after the American colonists won their independence from Britain. The struggle, therefore, for the recognition of equality and civil rights that are the subject of this book, has its origin in these crucial developments.

## Foreign Policy

In the period from 1865 until 1941, the federal government adopted a policy of isolationism believing that its main priority was governing the USA and avoiding involvement abroad. The support given to the allies in the First World War was a brief departure from this. Foreign policy became of increasing importance in the second half of the twentieth century with the imperative to prevent the spread of communism as the Soviet Union sought to establish spheres of influence during the Cold War and with nuclear proliferation. For the USA, involvement in Vietnam from 1959, the expansion of its nuclear capability and its involvement in the 'space race' also absorbed ever larger proportions of federal expenditure. This impacted on projects at home that required not only the attention and support of the President and the federal government but also substantial federal funding to facilitate the improvement of disadvantaged groups, for example African Americans, Native Americans and the poor.

The obsession with communism had already manifested itself at home in the **Red Scare** of the 1920s. A second intense period of anti-communism dates from the late 1940s until the mid 1950s and was characterised by a fear of the presence of Soviet spies in the US and suspicion of communist influence on American institutions and

## KEY TERMS

**Red Scare** The name given to the obsessive fear of communism that was produced by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia of 1917 and was pervasive in the years following and into the early 1920s. This reaction prompted reactionary measures towards left-wing organisations. Foreign born Americans were especially open to suspicion. 500 Russian émigrés were deported during this period.

## KEY EVENTS

**The McCarthy Purges (1951)** were named after the Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy and the campaign that he launched in the early 1950s to stamp out Communism. The main targets were academics in the universities who were accused of teaching subversive ideas. African Americans particularly came under suspicion, for example W.E.B. Du Bois (see page 38) and Mary McLeod Bethune (see page 237).

individuals. Sometimes referred to as the Second Red Scare, in the early 1950s it became known as **McCarthyism** after Joseph McCarthy, the US Republican Senator who became notorious for his zeal in rooting out alleged subversive individuals or organisations. Leaders of any kind of protest could arouse suspicion of being socialists or communists and attract condemnation for 'un-American' activities. African American and trade union leaders were particularly vulnerable as were university academics and some in the entertainment industry.

## KEY TERMS

**Congress** The federal legislature (parliament or law-making body) of the USA. It consisted of two houses with near equal powers, the democratically elected House of Representatives with numbers proportionate to population, and an indirectly (until 1913) elected upper house, the Senate, which had two representatives per state regardless of population. For legislation to be successful both houses had to pass any proposal.

**Ratified** Accepted and given assent.

## KEY CONCEPTS

**States' rights** Each individual state was originally all powerful. The birth of the United States involved states voluntarily giving up some of their power to a federal government. Many Americans, particularly southerners, believed they had the right to retain as many powers as possible – especially in domestic matters. During this period the states' rights argument was repeatedly used to defend a state law which the federal government tried to override or to prevent a federal law being passed.

## Government and politics

Some knowledge of the structure and working of the federal system of government in the US (see page 9 and diagram on page 4) is vital to understanding many of the terms and references in this book. In comparison with the working of other democracies, the US system was deliberately structured to ensure that there were checks and balances on the power of individuals or groups. For example, the system of voting can mean that **Congress** is made up predominantly of members from one party whereas the President can belong to another. This can impact on the power of a President to introduce change successfully. It was also constructed to leave a considerable amount of power in the hands of the government of each state. Whilst only the federal government can decide on foreign policy and national taxation, state legislatures have the power to make the laws that operate in each state. Consequently, for example, some women had voting rights in some states at certain points in this period that others did not have. All constitutional laws passed by Congress were only enforceable at state level when they had been **ratified** by three quarters of the total number of states. '**States' rights**' affected all the groups in this study to a greater or lesser extent but were especially significant in the struggle of African Americans for their civil rights.

The progress made by those groups seeking their civil rights depended, to some extent, on which of the two parties were in power. During the period from 1865 until 1913, government was dominated largely by the Republican Party with the exception of the years 1865–69, 1885–89 and 1893–97 when a Democratic President was elected. On the

# FEDERAL (NATIONAL) GOVERNMENT

## LEGISLATURE

### Congress

Senate:  
Elected for 6 years;  
2 members from each state.

House of Representatives:  
Elected for 2 years; members from each state according to size of population.

## EXECUTIVE

### President

Elected for 4 years.

### Cabinet

Made up of advisers chosen by the President.

### Departments

Headed by Secretaries to carry out government policies.

## JUDICIARY

### The Supreme Court

Highest court. Safeguards the Constitution. Acts to make the law clear and to decide, when asked, whether laws passed are constitutional or not.

### Federal Courts

## STATE GOVERNMENT

### Governor

Elected for 2 or 4 years.

### State Assembly

Has power to pass laws, control the police, education, health, etc. Can impose punishment for breaches of state law (e.g. can impose the death penalty for murder committed in the state if it chooses).

### Local government

The American people are involved in the US system of government via elections.

other hand, elections were frequently close and power was often balanced between the parties in Congress. The period of Reconstruction (1865–77) saw the struggle to re-establish the integrity of the United States following the Civil War. Civil rights were extended to the newly emancipated slaves during this period though not upheld. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, federal and state governments were largely preoccupied with the social and economic impact and implications of industrialisation, as well as the tensions caused by large scale immigration. The responses to these issues characterised what came to be known as the Progressive era by the turn of the century. Historians divide politics of the twentieth century into three eras or orders. Progressive Order (1900–33), The New Deal Order (1933–late 1960s) and The Divided Order which covers the last third of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century.

The Progressive Order was a response to the effects of industrialisation and was characterised by a willingness to engage with political and social reform, especially during

the years between 1900 and 1917. This gave some impetus to the causes fought for by women. For much of this period, with the exception of the period from 1912 until 1920, the Republicans were in power. A characteristic of Republican and Democrat politicians at the time was that they were largely of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant origin. This impacted on African-Americans and other non-whites who were segregated, on women and on immigrants who occupied a second class position. (It is significant that it was the Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson (1913–20) who introduced and supported the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919 giving women the vote although Wilson and the Democrats continued to oppose black civil rights.) The Wall Street Crash (1929) destroyed the credibility of the Republicans and brought the Progressive Order to an end.

The inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt as President marked the beginning of what is termed the 'New Deal Order' which survived until the late 1960s. The Democrats became the majority party with labour unions and women enjoying increasing political awareness and involvement. The Democrats became associated with the willingness of federal government to solve economic and social problems. However, it can be over-simplistic to categorise the position of the different leading parties too neatly. The position taken by politicians within one party on some issues could be opposed. Southern Democrats, for example, were traditionally anti-trade unions and black civil rights and did not always support reform measures in Congress. The inclination of successive Democratic governments to attempt to impose their will abroad in this period ultimately weakened the administrations of the day at home. The prolonged war in Vietnam contributed significantly to the end of the Democratic ascendancy.

A significant feature of the years known collectively as The Divided Order was the way in which no political party controlled the period as the presidency and the majority in Congress passed backwards and forwards between the candidates of both parties. It was characterised by the way in which the White House and Congress were in competition with each other when the majority in the latter was not of the same party as the President in the

White House. As politicians of both parties became increasingly more hungry for votes, greater attention had to be paid to the issues that most affected their electorate. Cultural and lifestyle issues such as abortion became more important than ever before with political implications.

### **What is meant by 'civil rights'?**

Civil rights are those rights which citizens in a democracy are entitled to expect. These include the right to vote, to equality of opportunity (to education, to work and to self-improvement, for example), the right to receive the protection of the law and to be judged fairly by the courts. Civil rights guarantee the liberty of the individual, including the freedom of thought, action, speech and expression. All of these were enshrined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and its amendments but remained open to interpretation. This is the role of the Supreme Court. As the highest court in the USA, it is an integral part of the system of government established in 1783, having the task of safeguarding the rights and freedoms embodied in the Constitution and ensuring that any laws that are passed do not violate its terms. The judges to the Supreme Court are nominated by the President. Their appointment must then be ratified by the Senate. This serves as a limit on the power of the President and is a further example of the checks and balances built into the Constitution to set parameters to the exercise of power for each of its parts, preventing any one part from becoming too powerful. One of the prime functions of the Supreme Court is still to interpret the Constitution as it applies to specific cases that are brought before it and also the terms of laws passed by Congress and State legislatures to ensure that they are in keeping with the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. It then passes judgement on alleged violations which, in turn, become points of reference for subsequent similar cases. At various times throughout our period, African Americans, Trade Unions, Native Americans and Women all appealed to the Supreme Court as the most effective means of making progress in securing their civil rights.