

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The USA in the 20th century

Episode 1 – The establishment of the USA

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Datshiane: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam, a history graduate and BBC presenter.

Katie: And I'm Katie Charlwood, a history podcaster.

Datshiane: Welcome to Bitesize GCSE history.

Katie: This series is all about American politics in society in the twentieth century. And in this episode, we get to grips with the origins of America and its diverse society.

Datshiane: Our period starts in the roaring twenties. I thought I'd get a source in early because that was how the America writer F. Scott Fitzgerald described the decade.

Katie: And that's impressive, but wait 'til you see my dance moves in the craze of age, the Charleston. Songs and score sheets can also be sources.

Datshiane: But you won't have to listen to us sing, but we will be sharing revision tips and hints along the way. Plus, at the end of each episode, we'll have a happy snappy summary to give those key facts extra sticking power.

Datshiane: Before we get started, a quick heads-up of the recurring themes in this series, which include capitalism and the economy, politics, segregation, migration and culture.

Katie: And as always, these themes will often be interlinked, so it might be handy to have a pen and paper, or laptop and keyboard, to make revision notes. And don't forget, there's more to help you get top marks on the Bitesize website.

Datshiane: Katie, don't you think we should start with a bit of a backstory though first?

Katie: The first American colony was established in 1607 and grew to thirteen colonies with a population of approximately two million people, by 1774. Grievances against the government in London led to the colonies declaring independence from Britain on the fourth of July 1776, to become an independent republic. The American Revolutionary War ended in 1783.

Datshiane: And the United States of America, or the USA, has commemorated Independence Day on that date ever since.

Katie: The new leaders of the USA wanted to create a more democratic political system, which they hoped would help prevent abuse of power.

Datshiane: That sounds all very democratic, but remember that at this time slavery was widespread, so there's a huge contradiction there.

Katie: Absolutely.

Katie: So, time to get writing some notes as we consider this new democratic system of government, or in this case, let's draw a tree.

Datshiane: Yes, think of the American political structure like a tree, with three branches of government. The first branch is the United States Congress. That's the legislative branch that makes the laws, it has two chambers, or its own smaller branches, and these are the House of Representatives and the Senate. And from early in the twentieth century, all senators, and all members of the House of Representatives, have been elected. Senators serve six-year terms, while members of the House of Representatives serve two-year terms.

Katie: But why two chambers you might ask? See, James Madison, one of the founding fathers, wrote in the Federalist papers, 'Ambition must be made to counteract ambition,' emphasising that the separation of powers is essential to balance interests.

Datshiane: But are you ready for your next branch, Katie?

Katie: I'm all ears... or branches.

Datshiane: Okay, well next there's the executive, who is the president. Then the vice president and their cabinet – their job is to carry out the laws passed by Congress.

Katie: And the president is elected every four years.

Datshiane: Finally, the judicial branch interprets the law in court. That includes the highest court in the country, the Supreme Court, and below that, the Federal Courts.

Katie: And then, each individual state also has its own local form of government that governs citizens within its borders.

Datshiane: So there's lots of branches of government there, and if you need some more detail to really twig on.

Katie: That was very nice.

Datshiane: Thank you. Go and check out the Bitesize website. But the most important thing to take from this, is that the system was designed so that there were checks and balances, so that no one person, or house, had all the power. Now we're getting into the swing of it, I bet you're hungry for more.

Katie: Or at least a wee bit peckish? Okay, so if this is a meal, then the opening course is the independence for the colonies, with the Declaration of Independence and new form of government.

Datshiane: And then the tasty main course is the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Katie: And the American constitution is the oldest one in the world still in use.

Datshiane: This constitution is a document outlining the rules by which a country is run, and there's been twenty-seven amendments to the Constitution.

Katie: The first ten amendments to the Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights. They protect all the basic freedoms of American people. Again, check out the Bitesize website for more details on these.

Datshiane: Okay, hungry for more? We have political parties for pudding.

Katie: There's always room for pudding.

Datshiane: Well, here we have two main parties that dominated politics in the United States throughout the twentieth century – the Democratic and Republican parties. They have adjusted their priorities over time, but let's just sum them up first.

Katie: So, Republicans adopted a laissez-faire attitude. For the Republicans, this means liberty or freedom to live your life and run your business with minimal government interference, which to them is one of the most important political beliefs.

Datshiane: So they prefer to leave businesses to push economic growth with only limited government intervention, and low taxes for businesses and the public. The party is also known as the GOP.

Katie: Or the Grand Old Party.

Datshiane: And they have a perspective that was typically conservative.

Katie: Which means, preferring to keep to old ways and only reluctantly allowing changes in traditional beliefs and practices.

Datshiane: Right, now the other big party is the Democratic Party, which also had a very different outlook on how to govern. They believe that government should intervene in the economy and society when necessary.

Katie: Like creating policies to protect vulnerable members of society.

Datshiane: The Democrats political perspective is broadly liberal; liberals are open to new ideas and tend to support policies that reflect the way society changes over time. The party adopted liberal policies after 1945.

Katie: And it's also important to remember that during the American Civil War in the 1860s, the Democrats had defended slavery. The Republicans were against the expansion of slavery and Lincoln, the Republican president, abolished slavery. But, throughout the twentieth century, more and more African Americans supported the Democratic Party, as it became more socially progressive.

Datshiane: These two parties are a whopping big part of the 'who' in American politics.

Datshiane: Okay, so now we know about the American form of government, what about Americans themselves?

Katie: We'll go into more detail in Episode 3, but it might help to paint a quick sketch of who they were.

Datshiane: So let's start with Native Americans, the original inhabitants of the North American continent.

Katie: Then there were the descendants of European colonisers who would come in in the seventeenth century and took land from the indigenous population.

Datshiane: From the nineteenth century, European colonisers, and their descendants, began moving westwards. In 1830, as a result of the Indian Removal Act, Native Americans were pushed eastwards resulting in conflict between the Native Americans and the European colonisers.

Katie: From 1860, there were a number of Indian wars, and between 1867 and 1875, they were forced into reservations with incredibly poor living conditions, forced adoption of Native American children and sterilisation.

Datshiane: And by 1885, the American government made all Native American territory available to white settlers. As a result, by the turn of the twentieth century, the Native American population fell dramatically.

Katie: Then there were African Americans, whose ancestors had been forced to come in their millions as people who had been enslaved.

Datshiane: And there was a new wave of immigrants from the mid-nineteenth century into the 1920s. These migrant communities included Irish people, many of whom were Catholics, but there were also Irish Protestants who migrated too; also people from Italy, China and millions of Jewish people fleeing violent persecution in eastern Europe. We'll look more at immigration in Episode 3.

Katie: So migration into the USA is very important, and this naturally has had a profound effect on culture, which developed in the USA, which we'll explore in later episodes. Time for a quick fire test to help you cement your facts. Three questions, five seconds to write it down. Let's go!

Datshiane: I'll go first. Why is the fourth of July an important day in the USA, Katie?

Katie: Well, it marks the date in 1776 that the colonies declared independence from Britain and the USA became an independent nation.

Datshiane: Very good. What functions did the three wings of the government have and who did they apply to?

Katie: That would be the legislator, Congress, made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate who drafted laws; the Executive, top down from the president - enacted those laws; the judiciary, headed by the Supreme court - interpreted laws. Federal laws applied to all Americans and each state could pass its own laws too.

Datshiane: And finally, who were the main political parties?

Katie: There are two. The Republican Party. It believed in limited state intervention in the economy and people's lives, and held traditional views. And then, the Democratic Party. It thought it was right for government to intervene to support the economy and to protect vulnerable people in society.

Datshiane: I think it's time for a well-earned recap.

Katie: Alrighty. Thirteen colonies declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, although the war went on until the British surrendered to George Washington in Yorktown, Virginia, in October 1781.

Datshiane: The government of that new republic, the USA, has three branches: legislative, executive and judicial - to make, enact and interpret laws.

Katie: The founders produced a constitution to determine how the new state would be governed. Then a Bill of Rights, which made twelve amendments to it.

Datshiane: These federal laws apply to everyone in the country, but each state also had a local government for citizens within its borders.

Katie: There are two main parties, the Democratic Party...

Datshiane: And the Republican Party.

Katie: There's tips, ideas and lots more to help you with your twentieth-century American revision on the BBC Bitesize website. And in other episodes in this podcast series.

Datshiane: In the next episode, we'll look at how growing consumerism, the economy, mass production and the motor industry brought the boom years, but also inequalities. And we'll also look at what the government did about it all. Thanks for listening.

Katie: Bye!