American History in No Time

A Quick & Easy Read for the Basics

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INTRODUCTION

“A republic, if you can keep it.”  
Benjamin Franklin

_The day after the Constitutional Convention adjourned, Franklin was asked, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?”_

“Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories.”  
Thomas Jefferson

“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”  
Thomas Jefferson

“If we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”  
Thomas Jefferson

“The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the republican model of government, are justly considered deeply, perhaps as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”  
George Washington

“At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a nation, and if their citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.”  
George Washington

The Founders believed that this nation would be preserved in liberty only if we as citizens understood its history, embraced its founding principles, and had an appreciation for the sacrifices made to secure the freedoms it affords.

On standardized tests given by the U.S. Department of Education, only 12 percent of high school seniors were found to be proficient in American history and civics, far below the results in reading, math, or science.

The Intercollegiate Studies Institute gave a similar test to college seniors at 50 large and small institutions around the country. The students performed so poorly that the average grade was an F. Harvard seniors scored the highest, but only a D+. The survey showed that after 15 years of formal education, less than half of the students knew the chronology of major events. They could not identify the source of the line: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Most did not know what happened at Yorktown and could
not answer an elementary question about the Bill of Rights or the Vietnam War.

An internet affiliate of *Newsweek* magazine polled a thousand people to gauge what they knew about America. The questions came from the tests given to immigrants applying for U.S. citizenship. Two-thirds of the respondents were not aware that capitalism is the economic system in the United States. Seventy percent did not know that the Constitution is the supreme law of the land. Eighty-one percent could not name one power belonging to the federal government.

*American History In No Time* is a quick and easy way to learn the basics. It is a condensed overview divided into short sections that can be read in around five minutes each. The entire book can be read in just a few hours. In that short amount of time you can have a solid foundation, knowing the key events, people, places, and principles.

The timeline on the following page is divided into five hundred-year periods with six key events plotted. As you read about other events, see where they fall on the timeline. A map of territorial acquisitions is also provided.

The book gives students an advantage in history classes. For adults no longer in school, it is the perfect refresher. Even those who are well-informed are likely to find many things they did not remember, did not have quite right, or never knew. *American History In No Time* can also be a valuable resource for parents who want to help their young children learn the basics in small doses.

The rise of this country from humble beginnings to become, in less than 200 years, the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful democracy in history is a fascinating story. The more you learn about it, the more you will value your heritage as a citizen of the United States of America.
Archaeologists do not know how the Western Hemisphere was first populated, but most believe that Asian hunter-gatherers migrated through Alaska. The migration was thought to have begun no earlier than 3000 B.C., but that theory changed following a discovery near Folsom, New Mexico. There, in 1927, a fluted stone spearhead* was found embedded in the skeletal remains of a large bison species that had been extinct for 10,000 years. Near Clovis, New Mexico, researchers have found projectile points and other artifacts that are close to 13,000 years old. Discoveries at other sites suggest that the peopling of the Americas may have begun even earlier.

American civilization entered a new stage of development with the adoption of agriculture. It began around 5000 B.C. in the middle or “meso” region of the hemisphere, from Central Mexico to Nicaragua. Three crops rose to prominence as staples: the agricultural trinity of corn (maize), beans, and squash. Other native foods, including pumpkins, potatoes, avocados, pineapples, tomatoes, peanuts, vanilla, and cocoa, were also cultivated in the hemisphere. Early inhabitants farmed without plows or draft animals, such as the horse, the cow, and the ox, which were brought to the Americas by Europeans.†

Agriculture provided more predictable, accessible, and plentiful food resources and made settlement possible in more areas. Groups that farmed continued to hunt and gather, however, to supplement their food supply and obtain medicinal plants.

Farming started to take hold in what is now the United States around 2000 B.C. It was conducive to permanent settlement but not a prerequisite. In areas where wild food resources were abundant, communities were able to thrive without it.

Ancient Americans did not live isolated from one another. They entered into alliances for warfare and crossed geographic, linguistic, cultural, and tribal boundaries to trade. Copper from the Great Lakes, mica from the Carolinas, turquoise from Arizona, obsidian from the Rocky Mountains, and shells from the coasts have been unearthed in graves and other archaeological sites hundreds and even thousands of miles away. Ideas, techniques, labor, language, and religious practices were also exchanged, and there was intermarrying between groups.

None of the indigenous people north of Mexico developed a written language, but linguists have identified hundreds of mutually unintelligible spoken tongues. Native Americans used sign language to bridge communication barriers. Petroglyphs (images carved into rocks) and
thirds vote rather than a simple majority. A unanimous vote was re-
quired to amend the Articles. Congress could not override a state law.

Delegates to Congress served one-year terms up to a maximum of
three terms in a six-year period, which created a problem of continuity
in the government. To compound matters, delegates often showed
their state’s indifference toward the institution by staying home instead
of attending congressional sessions.

The Confederation Congress was unsuccessful in persuading or co-
ercing Spain to grant Americans free navigation of the Mississippi
River. It was also unable to compel Britain to evacuate its outposts on
American soil along the Canadian border, a stipulation of the Treaty of
Paris.

In 1786, only three years after the end of the Revolutionary War, an
armed uprising broke out in Massachusetts over high taxes. The rebels
took over courthouses to prevent judges from ordering the seizure of
their property to satisfy delinquent assessments. Twelve hundred men
led by Daniel Shays threatened a federal arsenal. The state appealed to
the national government for assistance, but Congress lacked the where-
withal to help.

A former officer in the Continental Army suggested to George
Washington that he use his influence to help put down the insurrection.
Mortified by this violent challenge to law and order, Washington re-
plied, “Influence is no government. Let us have one by which our
lives, liberties, and properties will be secured.”

Many in Britain expected the United States to collapse and viewed
the civil unrest in Massachusetts and other states as proof that Amer-
icans were incapable of governing themselves. Shays’s Rebellion was
finally quelled in February 1787 by a state militia funded by Massa-
chusetts merchants. The inability of the Confederation Congress to
deal with the crisis underscored the desperate need for a stronger cen-
tral government and a more effective framework.

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THE CONSTITUTION

To address the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, a con-
vention was planned for May 1787 in Philadelphia. George Washing-
ton’s decision to attend added to the convention’s prestige and attracted
other prominent and able men. It was “an assembly of demigods” ac-
According to Thomas Jefferson, who was serving abroad as ambassador to France. Every state but Rhode Island sent representatives.

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention, meeting in the same room in Independence Hall where the Declaration had been adopted, realized the enormity of their task and what was at stake. Virginia delegate George Mason wrote, “The revolt from Great Britain and the formations of our new governments at that time were nothing compared to the great business now before us.” He predicted that “the happiness or misery of millions yet unborn” would be affected by their work.

The first order of business was to select someone to preside over the proceedings. The convention chose the man who had led the Continental Army to victory and was respected by all: George Washington. The participants then agreed to keep their deliberations strictly confidential. This was more conducive to open and frank discussion of the issues and made it easier for delegates to change positions. It is doubtful that the work of the Constitutional Convention could have been accomplished if delegates had divulged information or if the meetings had been open to the public or the press.

From the outset there was general agreement that the central government should be strengthened. The debate revolved around three fundamental questions:

- How should the federal government be structured?
- How strong should it be?
- How should each state be represented?

Instead of merely revising the Articles of Confederation, as Congress and the states had instructed, the delegates in Philadelphia set about creating a completely new document. James Madison is called the “father of the Constitution” because he wrote the Virginia Plan, the blueprint or basis for debate.

The issues were complicated and the delegates represented diverse interests and constituencies. They had to compromise for the process to be fair and to reach a consensus. Working every day except Sunday, they debated the important matters and resolved differences. On some points there were sharp disagreements. There were days when the convention seemed destined for failure, but the delegates persisted.

After four months of deliberation, they agreed on a final draft, written primarily by Pennsylvania delegate Gouverneur Morris. On Monday, September 17, 1787, the delegates met for the last time to sign the document. George Washington went first. Thirty-eight others came forward by state. Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania is said to have wept when he signed.
Hudson River in the east to Lake Erie in the west. The canal, initially four feet deep and forty feet wide, opened up another water route between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean. Horses, mules, or oxen hitched up to long ropes towed boats and barges up and down the canal.

Northern states experienced a rapid growth in industrialization – the use of machines to manufacture goods of higher quality and in larger quantities than is possible with human labor alone. The first manufacturing plants were built along rivers whose flowing waters provided power for the machines. With the advent of steam-powered engines, mechanized plants could operate virtually anywhere. Steam engines were also used to power boats and trains at speeds that drastically reduced the time it took to transport cargo and passengers.

The South lagged far behind the North in terms of industrialization. Agriculture, the largest economic sector in both sections of the country, was more dominant in the South, which enjoys a longer growing season and had more large farms, or plantations.

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SLAVERY

Slavery was an integral part of Southern life.* Its roots went back to colonial Jamestown. It was there in 1619 that a Dutch ship docked with 20 captive Africans on board.† John Rolfe paid for them, but it is uncertain whether their status in Virginia was that of slaves or indentured servants. The latter were obligated to work for a set period of time in exchange for passage, room and board, or other considerations that might include a tract of land. Such arrangements were usually voluntary and the servant had legal rights. During the colonial period many Europeans came to America as indentured servants, but for Africans – involuntary, permanent, and inheritable servitude was the norm. Slaves were considered property.

The African cultures from which the slaves came had diverse social and political systems and long-distance trade networks. Many different languages were spoken on the continent. Africans built urban communities with sophisticated architecture, created complex musical forms and works of art, and were skilled metal workers. Africa was a major supplier of gold.

Centuries before Europeans entered the slave market, African slaves were traded by other Africans and Arabs, but not in a systematic man-
In the latter half of the 1930s, the specter of another world war loomed. Italy attacked Ethiopia in 1935. Two years later, Japan went to war with China. An especially ominous threat emerged in Germany. Adolph Hitler’s Nazi party gained control of the government and rebuilt the military. In fiery speeches, Hitler fanned the resentment Germans felt about their treatment after World War I and called for revenge. He told ethnic Germans they were a superior Aryan* race destined to rule the world for a thousand years. He incited hatred and persecution of Jews, who were terrorized, rounded up and sent to prison, or killed.

Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles in 1936 by sending troops into the Rhineland. This German region along the Rhine River was supposed to remain free of militarization after World War I and serve as a buffer between the rest of Germany and neighboring countries to the west, but Allied nations acquiesced to the incursion.

Over the next three years, Germany annexed Austria, the Sudetenland (a part of Czechoslovakia inhabited by ethnic Germans), and then all of Czechoslovakia. Diplomatic efforts to halt the aggression ended in September of 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Britain, France, and other countries, finally convinced that Hitler could be stopped only by force, declared war on Germany. World War II had begun.

Hitler’s forces moved across Europe in swift attacks they called blitzkrieg. Denmark, Norway, Belgium, and Holland quickly fell to the German onslaught. France was defeated with help from Germany’s fascist ally, Italy. By the summer of 1940 most of the European mainland was under German or Italian control.

England was Germany’s next target. Hoping to bomb the country into submission or weaken its defenses in preparation for an amphibious invasion, Hitler sent his air force, the Luftwaffe, across the English Channel both day and night. The air raids killed over 40,000, but the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, vowed never to surrender. The greatly outnumbered Royal Air Force lost a thousand aircraft and 500 pilots in the Battle of Britain, but Germany lost 1,900 aircraft and 2,700 airmen. Hitler cancelled his plans for an invasion with ground troops.

The United States did not enter the war for more than two years. Many Americans were isolationists, but those sentiments gradually changed as the international situation worsened.

President Roosevelt prepared the country to assume a leading role and be “the great arsenal of democracy.” In 1940 he persuaded Con-
had kept the world under the specter of nuclear war for decades – was over.

* Under Reagan, the top marginal income tax rate for individuals fell from 70 percent to 28 percent. The highest corporate tax rate went from 46 percent to 34 percent.

† During Reagan’s presidency, the national debt grew from $934 billion to $2.7 trillion. In 2014 the debt stood at over $17.5 trillion, more than the gross domestic product (GDP), the value of the nation’s entire annual output of goods and services.

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GULF WAR, CLINTON, and the DIGITAL AGE

Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 threw the Middle East into crisis and threatened to disrupt the flow of oil through the Persian Gulf, a vital trade route for the world economy. The U.S. assembled a coalition of 34 nations to remove the Iraqis. The Gulf War began in January 1991 with a massive air campaign. The following month ground troops took just four days to liberate Kuwait and force Iraq’s capitulation.

After the Gulf War the U.S. economy went into recession. While a recession is less severe than a depression, two million Americans lost their jobs in 1991 and 1992 as companies cut costs. President Bush’s popularity quickly evaporated in the wake of persistent bad news about the economy. He was defeated in the 1992 election by Bill Clinton, who had been governor of Arkansas for 12 years.

The economy rebounded during the Clinton years. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) lowered or removed barriers to foreign trade. The stock market rallied as more Americans than ever before acquired a stake in the financial markets through personal investment accounts and 401(k) employee retirement plans. Billions of dollars were invested in computer-related companies. The internet was heralded as the basis for a new economy and the centerpiece of a new period in human progress: the Information Age. The period was also dubbed the Digital Age as microchips and computers found their way into practically every business and home. Steve Jobs’ company, Apple, and Bill Gates’ company, Microsoft, were key players in the proliferation of personal computers.

During President Clinton’s second term he was accused of perjury and obstruction of justice in connection with a lawsuit and grand jury