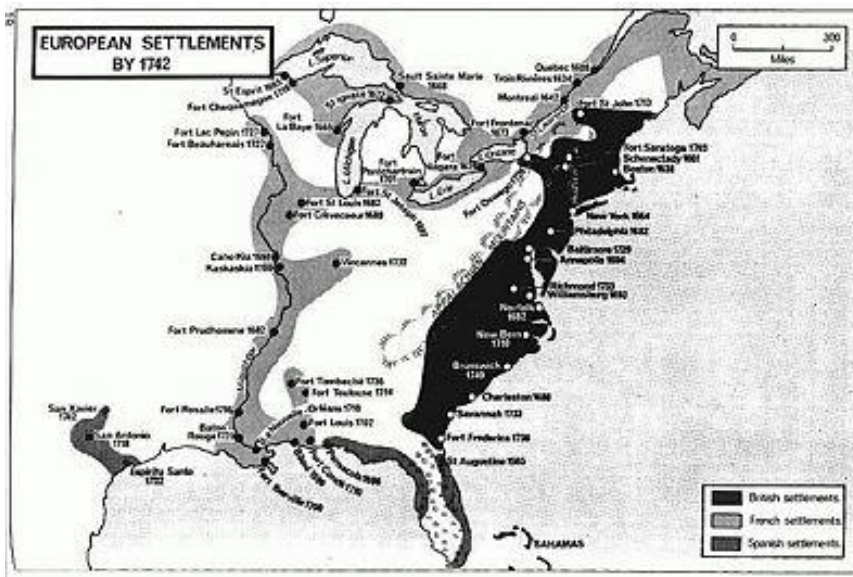


United States History: An Overview in the Form of a Series of Interpretations

The Colonial Age

1. Originally founded as commercial outposts of the British Empire, by the end of the 17th century the English colonies of North America had begun to evolve into two distinct societies, a communal society of small freeholders in **New England**, settled primarily by Puritans seeking both religious freedom and economic betterment, and a plantation society from the **Chesapeake** southward, based on commercial agriculture and in the midst of a transition from a labor force of **white indentured servants** to one of **African slaves**.



2. From 1700 to the end of the **Seven Years War** (1763), the English Colonies of North America expanded geographically, developed economically and became more ethnically diverse while their inhabitants grew accustomed to economic and political autonomy. Colonial society remained hierarchical,

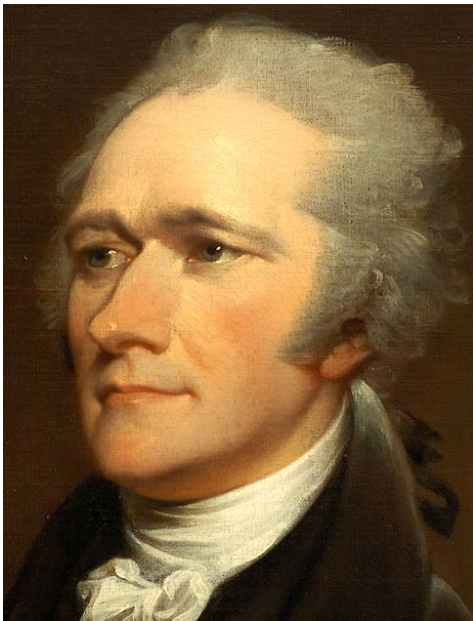
characterized by a clearly defined social order and dominated by a native-born elite of merchants and planter rather than a hereditary aristocracy.

The Revolutionary Era

3. In the aftermath of the **Seven Years War**, a costly adventure for the British, the British Parliament attempted to tighten its control over the empire. In

response, the North American colonists asserted their right to remain autonomous. When Parliament and the King insisted on reasserting their control, a majority of the colonists' elected representatives and in 1776 decided to declare independence rather than permit the British government to tyrannize over them.

4. Beginning with the adoption of the **Articles of Confederation** in 1781, the leaders of the former colonists embarked on a quest to establish a central government effective enough to express their new-found unity, but not so powerful as to threaten their liberties. When their first effort yielded disappointing results, a group of nationally-minded leaders launched a movement to replace the articles with a new, stronger central government. Led by **James Madison**, the **Founding Fathers** drew up a new constitution



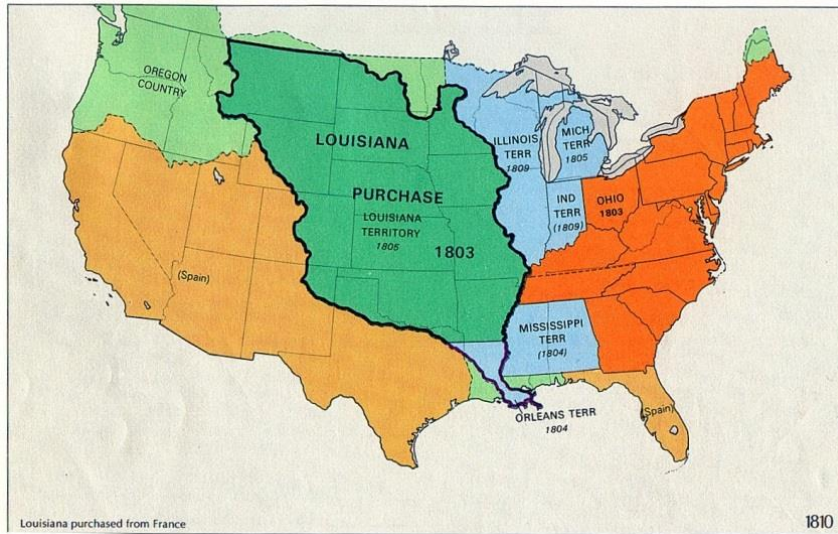
Alexander Hamilton

which gave the federal government such great power (for example, the power to tax and to regulate commerce) that only by promising to add a Bill of Rights were they able to secure the ratification of this document.

5. Although the Founding Fathers hoped that the new government would remain free of "faction" and partisan bickering, the programs of the first Secretary of the Treasury, **Alexander Hamilton**, to strengthen the central government led other Founding Fathers, particularly Madison and Jefferson, to organize an opposing group within the nation's leadership. Efforts by Hamilton and the **Federalists** (supporters of a stronger central government) to use the power of the federal

government to encourage economic activity prompted the rejoinder from Madison, Jefferson and their Republican followers that that "government which governs least, governs best." The issue of whether it is in the best interest of the people of the United States for our national government to stimulate economic activity has been a hotly debated issue in American politics ever since.

Jeffersonian Age



Louisiana Purchase, 1803

6. After a decade of intense conflict, exacerbated by strong differences of opinion over maintaining our neutrality with regard to the Anglo-French wars, Jefferson, Madison and their supporters prevailed as in 1800 Jefferson was elected president. He hoped to put an end to both "factions" and

Hamilton's policies. Ironically, both Jefferson and Madison abandoned their previous scruples about strengthening the power of the central government and embraced many of the measures they had so strongly opposed. Not only did they go to war with Britain in 1812 to defend our neutral rights, but they also introduced a protective tariff and created the Second Bank of the United States, largely following Hamilton's plans for the country. Importantly, in 1803 Jefferson authorized the **Louisiana Purchase**, a large acquisition of American territory from France that significantly enlarged the size of the country.

7. National feeling increased markedly as a result of the **War of 1812** and **Andrew Jackson's** decisive victory in the **Battle of New Orleans**. However, sectional tensions also increased significantly as resentment at the policies of the **Second Bank of the United States** during the **Panic of 1819** grew stronger, divisions over slavery as both a moral and a political issue grew wider and Southern objections to the protective tariff led to the revival of the states right doctrine of nullification.

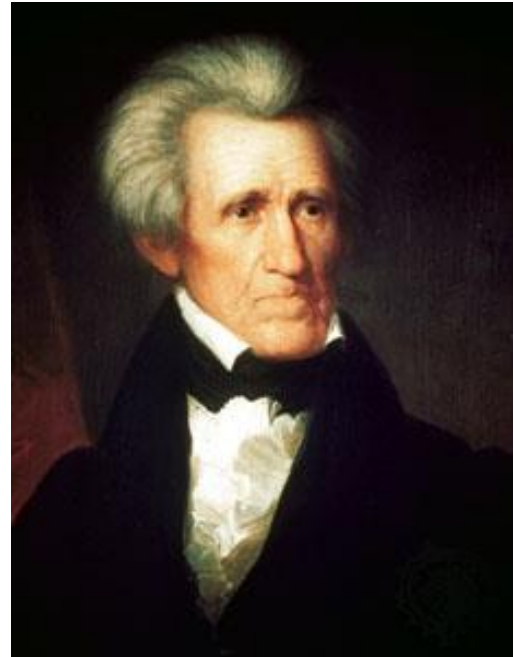
Age of Jackson

8. After a brief respite from partisan politics (the "**Era of Good Feelings**"), political conflict intensified as **Andrew Jackson** and his supporters built a new and stronger political organization in an effort to defend democracy and the interests of the "common man" against those who would use the federal

government to protect monopolies. Popular participation in politics reached new heights as new campaign tactics, stronger, more widespread organization led by professional politicians and increasing involvement in a money economy combined to give birth to a second, more permanent national party system.

9. Because the major political parties of the time did not address many of the issues most important to ordinary Americans, a wide variety of reform movements in the form of voluntary associations were organized during the generation after the War of 1812. Women inspired to improve society by the teachings of evangelical Protestant ministers during the **Second Great Awakening** were among the

most dedicated and determined reformers, taking part in organizations that worked to feed the poor, care for the mentally ill, abolish slavery, institute moral reform, encourage temperance and promote equal rights for women.



Andrew Jackson

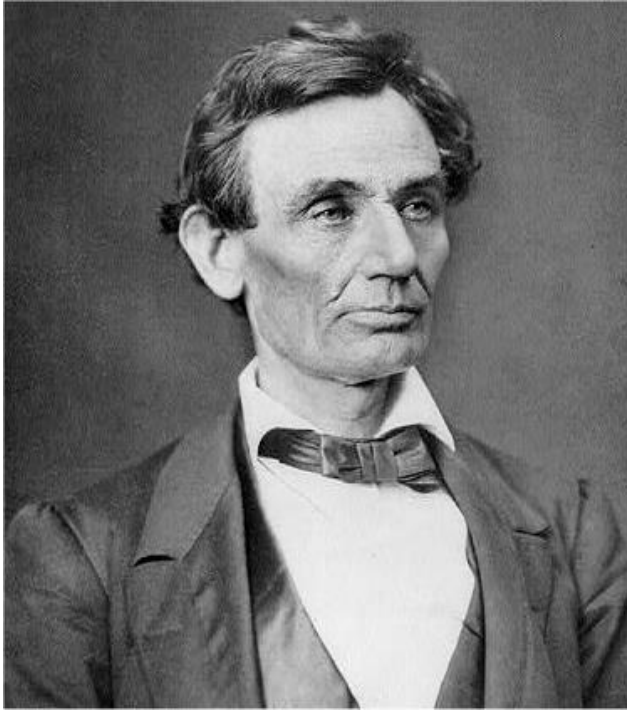


Erie Canal, 1825

10. **Westward expansion** in the aftermath of the War of 1812 accelerated the nascent "Transportation Revolution." Roads and turnpikes were succeeded after 1815 by the increased use of steamboats on the nation's rivers and an era of canal building inspired by the success of New York's Erie Canal, completed in 1825. Railroad building increasingly stole the spotlight from canals after 1840, but it was not until

after 1850 that railroads surpassed canals and steamboats as the primary means of transporting goods and passengers in the United States.

The Civil War



Abraham Lincoln

11. Improved transportation, growing sectional economic specialization and rapid westward expansion contributed to strong differences of opinion over the expansion of slavery into the territories. In late 1860, Southern slaveholders, perceiving a threat to their political power and, consequently to their peculiar institution, decided to secede from the Union rather than risk subordination to those such as **Abraham Lincoln** and the new **Republican Party** who adamantly opposed the expansion of slavery, but did not yet support its abolition. Following four years and over 600,000 deaths, the war ended in

1865 with a victory for a restored Union with slavery destroyed.

12. Unable to organize its economy or unite its society to fight a long and costly war and unable to convince most Northerners to permit them to destroy the Union, the former Confederates tried to take advantage of Lincoln and Johnson's lenient **Reconstruction** policies to win the peace. Finding the cost in time, energy and money too great, northern Republicans soon abandoned their efforts to aid the freedmen and, in exchange for southern agreement to support economic policies favorable to the North, agreed to leave white southerners alone to deal with African Americans as they saw fit.

The Closing of the Frontier

13. A massive migration of population in the aftermath of the Civil War onto land only recently opened to white settlement and unprecedented railroad building helped produce a tremendous increase in the amount of acreage under cultivation and, therefore, agricultural production. The result was a renewed effort by white Europeans to destroy Native Americans and their culture and a significant decline in the price of most agricultural commodities.

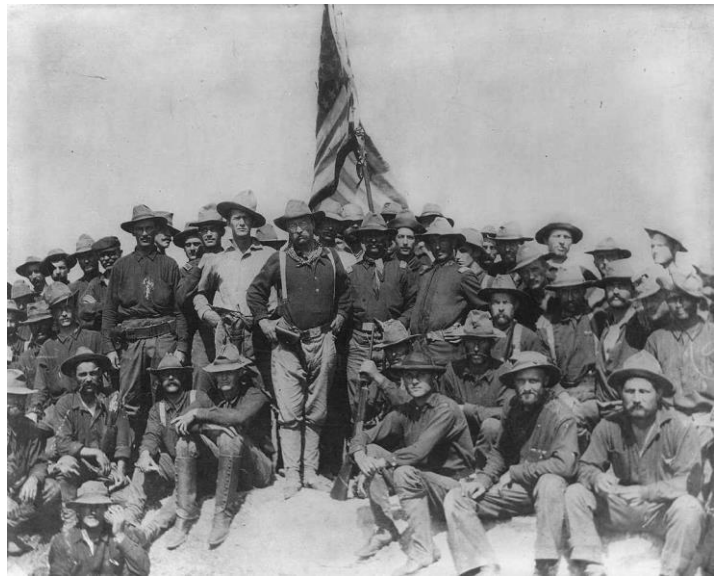
In combination with the growing isolation of many farm families and the declining influence of farmers over national policies, these economic changes help give birth to a political insurgency known as the **Populist Movement**.

Populism and Progressivism – the Age of Reform

14. At the same time that the **Populists** were calling attention to government policies which worked to the disadvantage of farmers, urban dwellers were becoming increasingly disturbed by problems created by declining opportunities for the self-employed, a widening gap between rich and poor, the growing economic power of big businesses and the substantial political influence business leaders increasingly wielded over corrupt politicians. The result was the so-called "**Progressive Era**," a period from the 1890s to 1916 dominated by a shifting coalition of movements aimed at ending abuses of power, reforming corrupt institutions and applying scientific principles and efficient management techniques to these reformed institutions.

American Imperialism

15. America's Rise to World Power, which began with the build up of the United States Navy in the 1880s and 1890s, reached its first plateau with the **Spanish-American War of 1898** and the acquisition of an overseas empire. Once the nation achieved the status of a world power, our policy makers began enunciating a series of policies, particularly the **Open Door Policy** and the **Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine**, which clarified and reinforced the traditional



Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War

policy of unilateralism, that is, of no entangling alliances. When the overseas expansion of Germany and Japan and heightened conflict caused by the growth of nationalism throughout Europe produced a general European conflagration in **World War I**, President Wilson found it necessary to intervene in an effort to "make the world safe democracy." As a result of the devastation caused by the war to Great Britain and the other Great Powers of

Europe, the United States emerged, almost unnoticed, in 1919 as the world's leading economic, financial and military power.

The Roaring Twenties

16. Postwar domestic problems, including massive strikes and widespread racial violence, combined with disillusionment at the harshness of the **Treaty of Versailles** led most Americans to turn their backs on the idealism of the Progressive Era and seek to escape into a world of pleasure and wishful thinking. The result was a period of hedonism and hype, bigotry and intolerance, get-rich-quick schemes and a willingness to ignore laws such as **Prohibition** that interfered with having a good time. The "**Roaring Twenties**" were an era marked by **nativism, immigration restriction, religious fundamentalism** and the **revival of the Ku Klux Klan**.

The Great Depression



FDR

17. The Stock Market Crash and the **Great Depression** completely altered the mood of the American people from heedless optimism to strong pessimism and a loss of confidence in our business leaders and the capitalist system itself. It took the political savvy, can-do attitude and willingness to experiment on the part of **Franklin D. Roosevelt** to restore confidence and promote at least a temporary economic recovery. Roosevelt's **New Deal** policies drastically altered the role of the federal government, making it a permanent presence in the lives of its citizens and the guarantor of both social security and economic prosperity. The experience of coping with the depression temporarily discredited the "**trickle down**"

economic policies of the 1920s and gave birth to a new approach that became known as **Keynesian economics**.

World War II and the Cold War

18. The Nazi threat and especially the Japanese attack on **Pearl Harbor** in December 1941 convinced a majority of the nation's leaders that isolation no

longer meant safety or security. After leading a coalition of Allied powers to victory in yet another war to preserve democracy, the United States emerged at the conclusion of the conflict as, unmistakably, the world's greatest economic, financial and military power. Frightened by the threat--as much ideological as military--of worldwide Soviet expansion, the United States abandoned its traditional opposition to binding political commitments and took the lead in forming the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** in 1949. Beginning as an effort to defend Europe against the spread of Soviet Communism, the **Truman Doctrine** and the policy of "**containment**" were quickly applied to Korea, Southeast Asia and even the Middle East as the **Cold War** developed into a global conflict between the capitalists of the "free world" and the dark forces of revolutionary communism.



Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941

Civil Rights Movement

19. Spurred by Soviet criticisms to remedy our shortcomings and pressured by the growing assertiveness of African Americans, most white Americans and those of our leaders who believed in the principle of equality and/or stood to benefit politically increasingly supported the demand for equal rights for black people. Beginning with legal challenges to the doctrine of "**separate but equal**" and progressing to non-violent direct action, the African American Civil Rights Movement won a series of hard fought victories culminating in the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** and the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**. However, guarantees of full legal and political equality only made widespread poverty more difficult to bear and produced yet another series of efforts to remedy glaring economic inequities and increase both racial pride and "**Black Power**."

Cold War Calamities

20. The same Cold War mentality that produced the domestic excesses of the **Red Scare** of the late 1940s and 1950s and **McCarthyism** led to tragedy and

national disaster when it was applied to Southeast Asia. United States intervention in a civil war in Vietnam in an effort to stop the spread of communism proved to be both fruitless and misguided. The **Vietnam War** exhausted the funds originally earmarked for **Great Society** programs, crippled the **War on Poverty** and convinced many African Americans and others in favor of further reform that



Vietnam War

our leaders could not be trusted. The loss of faith in our national leadership, which began with the Johnson Administration, reached its height during Nixon's presidency, culminating in the **Watergate scandal** and the resignation first of the Vice President and then the President.

21. Having learned the lesson of "imperial overreach" taught by the loss of the Vietnam War, successive administrations pursued a more cautious foreign policy, working to defeat the Soviet Union through peaceful competition. Taken by surprise by the sudden fall of the **Berlin Wall** and the equally unanticipated collapse of the Soviet Union, the Reagan and Bush administrations declared victory in the Cold War and took credit for engineering the Soviet demise. Whatever the actual cause of the Soviet collapse, the United States now finds itself, at least temporarily, as the world's only Superpower, dominant not only militarily, but also economically, financially and technologically.

22. With the zeal for further reform dampened by the violence and perceived excesses of "the Sixties," a mood of disillusionment with the role of the federal government (especially the "**Imperial Presidency**") set in as the "credibility gap" was quickly succeeded by the Watergate scandal. By 1980, the mood of the nation seemed to change yet again, as economic and political conservatives combined forces with cultural and religious conservatives to elect Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Although some questioned whether the increased success of the Republican Party thereafter marked a true resurgence of conservatism, there could be little doubt that, more often than not, political and economic conservatives triumphed over liberal and reformers in disagreements over key policy issues.