

# American Political System

## **TASK:**

1. Read the handout and highlight key information
2. Create your own guide to the USA political system focusing on:
  - The three branches of power and the links between them (Checks and balances)
  - The two main political parties

**This could be in the form of a booklet, poster or a piece of extended writing.**

#### KEY TERM

**pluralism:** a form of society in which the members of minority groups maintain their independent cultural traditions

**Constitution:** the 'rule book' which states how a country or organisation is to be governed

**entrenched:** in political terms this means very well established and difficult to change, as in, 'the First Amendment is entrenched in the US Constitution'

This book will take you on a journey from the end of the Second World War to the start of the eighties, introducing you to a period of history in which the concept of the 'American Dream' became widely discussed both in the USA and abroad. At its most basic, the Dream stems from the Declaration of Independence which pronounced both that 'all men are created equal' and that they have a right to 'Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' But the signatories to the declaration didn't count slaves as men, or give many rights to women. The phrase itself was only popularised when the historian James Truslow Adams wrote in 1931 *The Epic of America* that the Dream meant 'a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank'. On the face of it, that promise seems a useful pledge for any government and people to aspire to but was nothing that would make the US unique in the world.

What set the US apart in 1945 was the **pluralist** nature of its society. Its population was incredibly diverse in terms of race, religion, culture and tradition. Many of these people were first or second generation immigrants whose ideas about government and rights clashed with the principles of the **Constitution**. Others were part of an **entrenched** system of prejudice between whites and other races whose roots stretched back beyond the constitution itself.

The period from 1945 to 1980 was a time of economic growth, of nuclear fear and of heroic movements for civil rights. Yet it was also a time when the presidency itself came under scrutiny from a growing media, a frustrated Congress and through the actions of, perhaps, the defining figure of the era, Richard Nixon, president between 1969 and 1974. The media became the lens through which Americans experienced their government, the products they could buy and the rest of the world and the growth of the various media outlets: TV, radio, film, magazines and newspapers is entwined with the political, social and economic events and changes in these years.



**Fig. 1** US marines raise the American flag atop Iwo Jima, Japan, towards the end of the Second World War in 1945

This book begins in 1945 when it was clear that the US and its allies were going to triumph in the war against the Nazis and Japanese. More precisely it begins with the death of Franklin Roosevelt on 12 April 1945 and the accession of his vice president Harry Truman. Truman inherited a nation that was accepted, both at home and abroad, as one of the two greatest powers in the world. But whereas Stalin could rule the Soviet Union as a dictator, the US president's power came from the people and was defined by the Constitution, the seven articles and 22 amendments (in 1945) of which form the backbone of the events of the period.

The Constitution defined how the different parts of government are elected, removed and their powers. It also establishes the rights of US citizens including the right to free speech, freedom of religion and a free press (Article 1), the right to bear arms (Article 2), the right not to self-incriminate (Article 5, source of the phrase 'take/plead the fifth'), the abolition of slavery (Article 13), right of citizenship (Article 14) and the right to vote regardless of colour or race (Article 15). The latter three were all introduced after the North won the Civil War of 1861–65.

This seems to imply that the Constitution was relatively easy to change but nothing could be further from the truth. Of the 27 amendments ratified (approved) since the first in 1791, 11 came in the first five years. Over 11,500 have subsequently been turned down. To change the US Constitution requires a proposal approved by either two thirds of Congress or two thirds of the states. Ratification, the final approval stage, then requires three quarters of the states to approve of the amendment.

Changes are therefore hard to achieve, not least because of the regularly changing make up of Congress and the presidency. The electoral merry-go-round involves:

- The president and the vice president being elected together in a presidential election held once every four years in November with the winner taking office in January of the following year.
- Elections to Congress taking place every two years. Congress has two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives.
- The Senate has 100 members, two from each state, elected for a six-year term with one third being renewed every two years. The group of the Senate seats that is up for election during a given year is known as a 'class'; the three classes are staggered so that only one of the three groups is renewed every two years. It has a shared role in making the law with the House of Representatives but it can also act as a check on the larger house to prevent the most populous states becoming too powerful. The Senate also has sole power of approval on foreign treaties and cabinet and judicial nominations, including appointments to the Supreme Court.
- The House of Representatives has 435 members, with the number of members from each state being dictated by the size of the population in that state, elected for a two-year term in single-seat constituencies. House of Representatives elections are held every two years on the first Tuesday after 1 November in even years. The House is responsible for initiating all revenue-based legislation which then goes to the Senate for review and approval. The House is also the only one of the two chambers that can begin impeachment proceedings.

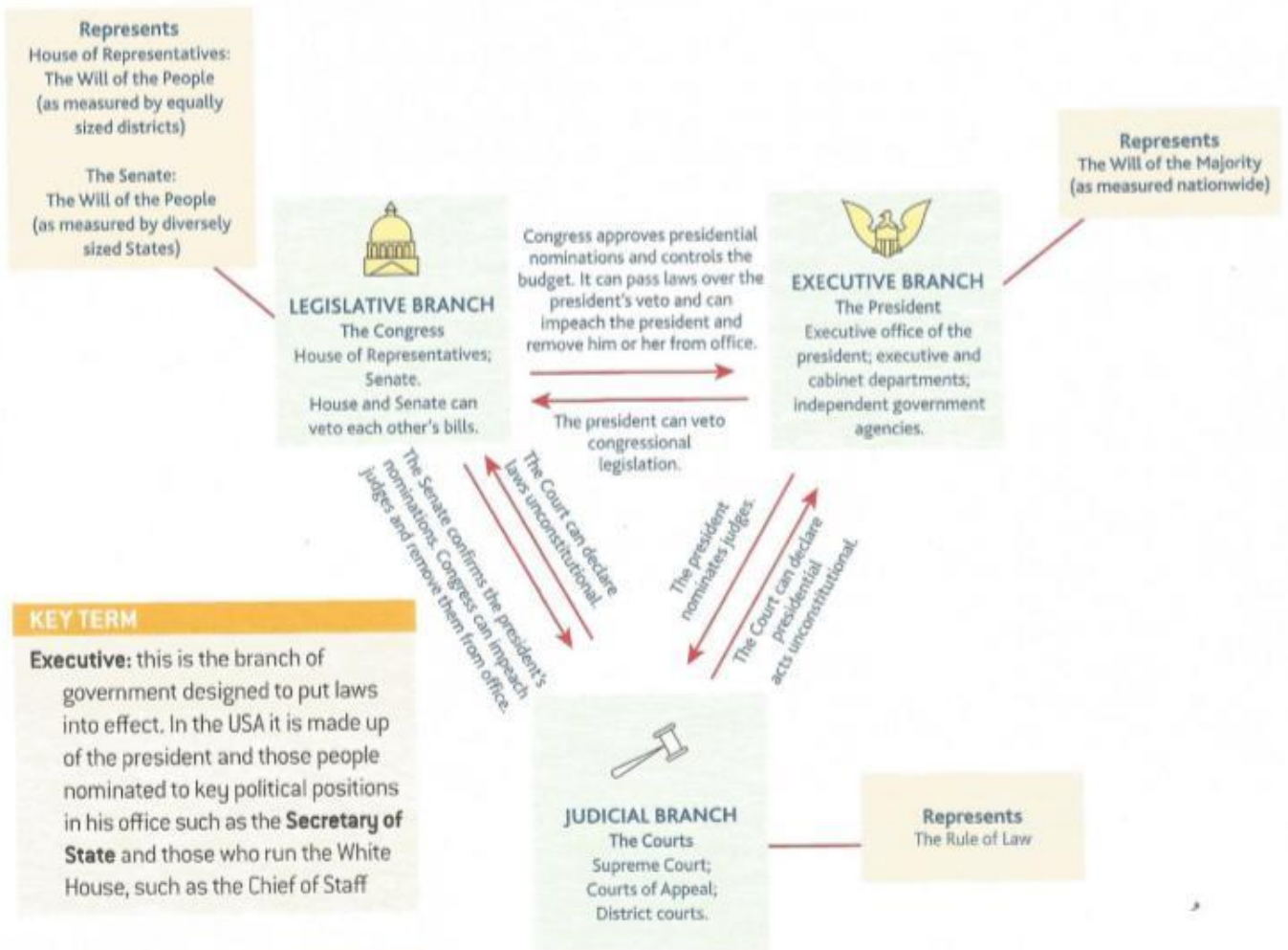
The Supreme Court consists of a chief justice and eight associate justices who are nominated by the sitting president and then confirmed or rejected by the Senate. After being appointed, justices have life tenure unless they resign or retire.

Complicating matters further is the fact that the US is a federation meaning that the above system of Executive, Legislature and Judiciary (or president,

## KEY TERM

**National Guard:** reserve soldiers of the US army who can be brought in by a state's governor in emergency situations or federalised by the president to act on his authority

Congress and Supreme Court) is reproduced at the state level meaning each state has an Executive (the Governor), a state legislature and a state Supreme Court who are elected in a similar way. States have control over many aspects of policy including education, sales tax, use of the death penalty, jury selection in trials and more recently gay marriage and use of medical marijuana. States also have an armed force, known as the **National Guard** which is under the command of the Governor but can be federalised (brought under the president's control) in an emergency.



## KEY TERM

**Executive:** this is the branch of government designed to put laws into effect. In the USA it is made up of the president and those people nominated to key political positions in his office such as the **Secretary of State** and those who run the White House, such as the Chief of Staff

This seemingly cumbersome system had, in fact, served the country well in providing stability and economic success. In 1945 the USA was the third largest country in the world by area (after Russia and Canada) and by population (after India and China). One hundred and forty million people lived there, a figure that grew to over 227 million by 1980. It was also blessed with huge natural resources including substantial deposits of coal, oil and natural gas which meant that the US was virtually self-sufficient in meeting its energy needs in 1945. This natural bounty had given Americans a feeling of superiority that was enhanced by victory in the Second World War, a sense of a '**Manifest Destiny**' to lead the world and a belief that the USA was exceptional. In 1945 this belief was shared by much of the world with millions of people desperate to emigrate to the 'land of the free' from war shattered Europe and poverty stricken countries elsewhere.

However, all was not well in the USA itself. Though its natural resources were the envy of the world and its capitalist system allowed many to benefit

## KEY TERM

**Secretary of State:** a senior appointment in the office of the president primarily concerned with foreign affairs

## KEY TERM

**Manifest Destiny:** a phrase first used by the journalist John O'Sullivan in 1845 which has come to mean both America's destiny to expand and spread its democratic capitalist identity and the special qualities of American people that enable it to do this

through well paid jobs, many groups felt they had no access to the American Dream. Some of these groups had protested prior to the Second World War. Women had gained the right to vote in 1918 through a suffrage movement led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and had played a key role in the manufacturing effort that had helped win the Second World War. This provided a sense of independence and fulfilment that was lost in the aftermath of the war. African-Americans had achieved freedom from slavery in 1865 but the defeated southern states had used their constitutional right to create their own laws to introduce segregation in schooling, transport and recreational facilities. Groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had campaigned for black rights but a legal decision known as *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896 had established that the laws could remain provided 'separate but equal' facilities existed for blacks and whites. Meanwhile terror groups like the Ku Klux Klan kept the black population living in fear through violence and intimidation.

So in 1945, America was the effective leader of the free world and its people mostly felt that they lived in the best country on earth. However this feeling of superiority was under threat. The spectre of fascism had been defeated but the post-war territorial acquisitions of the communist Soviet Union in Eastern Europe made Americans fearful of the influence of 'reds'. An accusation of being a 'communist' could be levelled at anyone, sometimes for the most innocent opinions and this fear of communism persisted throughout the period, waxing and waning through McCarthy in the early 1950s to Nixon in the 1970s to Reagan after 1980.

What perplexed Americans about communism most was how it could possibly appeal. They saw the advantages of a free market that provided comforts unparalleled in the world from cars to fridges to Coca-Cola and the evolution of the American consumer is one of the key economic themes of this period. Advertising and manufacturing manipulated the newly wealthy into desiring material possessions above social goods like schools, libraries, highways and health care and while this consumption boosted the economy it also had harmful effects on the environment and on social cohesion. For those that could not afford the glittering array of new products, resentment grew through the 1950s and this was to explode in the decade that followed.

The 1960s saw protests emerge across America as noisy minorities sought to reclaim their share of the Dream. African-Americans sought political rights with first non-violence and later intimidation; women sought social and economic equality and young people sought to right the wrongs that the older generation were perceived to be committing in Vietnam and at home. All of these protests were covered by a media that had grown rapidly through TV, at the movie theatres and in local and national newspapers and magazines. The media's coverage of the protests and the reasons behind them forced politicians to respond and make sweeping promises about making the American Dream more accessible for the majority. But those making promises weren't immune to having their dreams shattered. First the glamorous young President John F Kennedy was shot dead in 1963, then the firebrand black radical Malcolm X in 1965. In the space of two months in 1968, Martin Luther King and the presidential hopeful Bobby Kennedy were both killed in the culmination of five years that had seen America's cities aflame with rioting and its proud reputation as the defender of peace fatally damaged by Vietnam.

The 1970s saw the cracks in the Dream further exposed as Vietnam dragged on, economic superiority was eroded by the defeated nations of the Second World War and protest movements were hampered by a lack of government money to address their demands. The nation needed hope and Richard Nixon seemed to offer it by appealing to the 'Silent Majority': the great

mass of Americans who still believed in the Dream and, more importantly, were willing to work for it. But Nixon's downfall in the Watergate Affair was a better story than any that Hollywood had produced and gave rise to a pessimism about America's future that tainted Nixon's two successors. They suffered further economic trials and succeeded only in swapping the jungles of Vietnam for the deserts of the Middle East when it came to foreign policy problems. By 1980 the Dream came full circle as Hollywood casting finally got its hands on the presidency and former B-movie actor Ronald Reagan could promise that he would make America great again.

## KEY CHRONOLOGY

### Presidents of the United States, 1933–89 (D = Democrat, R = Republican)

March 1933–April 1945

Franklin Roosevelt (D)

April 1945–Jan 1953

Harry Truman (D)

Jan 1953–Jan 1961

Dwight Eisenhower (R)

Jan 1961–Nov 1963

John F Kennedy (D)

Nov 1963–Jan 1969

Lyndon Johnson (D)

Jan 1969–Aug 1974

Richard Nixon (R)

Aug 1974–Jan 1977

Gerald Ford (R)

Jan 1977–Jan 1981

Jimmy Carter (D)

Jan 1981–Jan 1989

Ronald Reagan (R)