About United States Essay, Research Paper

United States (Overview), United States of America, popularly referred to as the United States or as America, a federal republic on the continent of North America, consisting of 48 contiguous states and the noncontiguous states of Alaska and Hawaii. The United States is discussed in seven articles: this overview, as well as separate articles on United States (Geography), United States (People), United States (Culture), United States (Economy), United States (Government), and United States (History).

These six topics geography, people, culture, economy, government, and history comprise the interrelated elements of the nation’s experience. Geography is the first element because landforms, resources, and climate affected how people who came to the United States formed new societies. People, in all their variety, are the second element because they formed communities and built a society. The next three elements are major parts of that society its culture, economy, and government. History tells the story of how people created a society. It details how people adapted to geographical settings, how they constructed and changed their economy and government, and how their culture changed along the way. Thus all of the six topics geography, people, culture, economy, government, and history form a progression of interconnected topics.

E Pluribus Unum: The American Experience

E Pluribus Unum is the United States motto, appearing on the nation’s coins and paper money, and on many of its public monuments. It means “From many, one.” First used to unify the 13 British colonies in North America during the American Revolution (1775-1783), this phrase acquired new meaning when the United States received wave after wave of immigrants from many lands. These immigrants had to find ways to reconcile their varied backgrounds and fit together under a constitution and a set of laws. That process of creating one society out of many different backgrounds is one of the biggest stories of the American experience.

“What then is the American, this new man?” asked one of thousands of immigrants who came to North America in the 18th century. “He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles…Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.”

Michel Guillaume Jean de Cr?ecoeur, who wrote under the pseudonym J. Hector St. John, wrote these words more than 200 years ago. In 1759, at the age of 24, Cr?ecoeur emigrated from France to the American colonies. Learning English quickly and making a success of himself as a farmer in upstate New York, he married an English woman and became a celebrated observer of the American scene. Amazed at the mingling of people from many parts of the world, Cr?ecoeur pointed to a family headed by an Englishman who had married a Dutch woman, whose son married a French woman, and whose four sons had each married a woman of a different nationality. “From this promiscuous breed that race now called Americans have arisen,” he proclaimed.

A hundred years later, on the other side of the continent, Harriette Lane Levy wrote of growing up as a Jew. In her San Francisco neighborhood, she remembered, “The baker was German; the fish man, Italian; the grocer, a Jew; the butcher, Irish; the steam laundryman, a New Englander. The vegetable vendor and the regular laundryman who came to the house were Chinese.”

The United States began as an immigrant society, and it has continued to be a mingling of immigrants ever since. Even Native Americans, the first people to live in North America, descended from people who arrived from Asia many thousands of years ago. Since 1820, 63 million immigrants have arrived in the United States. Never in the history of the world has a country been braided together from so many strands of people arriving with different languages, histories, and cultures.

How could a nation of such diversity meld together so many different humans? Alexis de Tocqueville, another Frenchman who traveled to the United States, was fascinated with this question. He knew that the nation had to find some kind of glue to bind together so many different peoples. He found that glue in the American political system that had developed by the 1830s a politics of participation based on the notion that to be legitimate and lasting, a government had to derive its power from the people. These principles were part of the political system created by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. This system aimed to create “one federated whole,” but this was an ideal yet to be accomplished. Today, the American people are still reaching for that ideal.

The goal of E pluribus unum has been closely connected with an ongoing debate: What is the meaning of the three resounding words that open the Constitution of the United States “We, the people.” Every generation has faced the question, How wide is the circle of “we”? The various answers to that question have defined the degree of democracy in the United States. Creating one from the many, then, has been inseparable from deciding how democratic the nation will be.

Accordingly, a second theme of this set of articles on the United States is the growth of democracy in the nation and in its institutions and culture. This process has sometimes been tumultuous and often dramatic. The idealistic agenda set forth by the Founding Fathers that all men are created equal and are endowed with certain inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness remains the standard by which we judge ourselves.

These two themes help connect the various parts of the American experience, each of which is described in one of the six articles on the United States. Each of the articles is one part of the jigsaw puzzle that is the American experience. The puzzle forms a picture, which can only be fully understood when all the pieces are in place.

United States Geography

Early school geography lessons begin with names and locations of the 50 U.S. states and their capitals. But geography is much more than places on a map. Geography more broadly involves peoples, places, and environments and how these three are connected. The United States (Geography) article describes the physical features of the United States such as its landforms, lakes, rivers, and climate. It also examines the distinctive regions of the United States. Finally, the article traces how people transformed the landscape and how they grappled with environmental issues connected to population growth, urbanization, and industrialization.

In the article on geography, the interactions of people, places, and environments are related to one of the themes the search for unity, for oneness, among what one early observer of the American scene called the nation’s “mixed multitude.” Every immigrant to this country comes with a geographical, historical, and cultural background, and all three become part of the American mosaic. Some, because of geographical closeness to their home country, especially those from Mexico, retain more of their home culture (and maintain it longer) than those whose place of origin lies an ocean away. Similarly, the place where an immigrant takes up a new life in a city filled with people from the same country or in a small community with few friends from the home country friends can affect how they absorb American ways and how they meld into the larger society.

Geography affects every human, every community, every region, and every nation. Hence, a geographical dimension will be found in the other five major articles on the United States. Geography is one reason why so many people immigrated to the United States or migrated from one region to another. The U.S. economy depends heavily on geographic factors such as natural resources, climate, and the transportation provided by its waterways. Some local governments are organized around geography. For example, rivers may mark the boundaries of counties. History, in integrating all parts of the American experience, always has geography as one of its parts.

United States People

When Europeans first reached North America in the 1520s, they encountered other people Native Americans and they also encountered a new geography. Some imagined they were entering “a howling wilderness” an environment filled with exotic flora and fauna but sparsely populated. In reality, they found their way to a landmass that was thickly settled. But soon after the Europeans’ arrival, the population of the Americas plummeted, largely because Native Americans lacked immunity to smallpox, influenza, and other infectious diseases that the Europeans brought with them. Europeans mostly by choice and Africans almost entirely by coercion came to the western hemisphere. However, the number of people living in what is today the continental United States did not regain the population level before European contact (estimated to be 8 million to 10 million indigenous people) until the 1840s.

How did the population of the United States grow to today’s 270 million the third largest in the world? The article United States (People) traces this growth. It is closely connected with the first theme of E pluribus unum and the second theme of striving for greater democracy.

The article details the diversity of the U.S. population as it grew from natural increase and from immigration. More than that of any other country in the world, the population of the United States has increased through repeated waves of immigration. Immigration gives the United States its distinctive character, and each wave of immigration changed the ethnic, racial, and religious composition of U.S. society. This diversity provided a rich mingling of cultures, but it has also been a source of tension and conflict, clouding the American promise of equality, freedom, and justice, and impeding the pursuit of E pluribus unum.

The article also shows how the population of the United States has changed. The fertility rate, for example, has fallen steadily over the past two centuries. In the colonial era, the average American woman gave birth to eight children; in the 1990s, she had two children. This profound revolution in the biological history of the nation connects with another major change in U.S. society women working outside the home. The connection between changing birthrates and the shifting composition of the labor force is very powerful. Or consider life expectancy. People live much longer than they did in the early years of the United States, raising questions about how to maintain the social security system and provide care for the elderly. This is just one example of how the people, the economy, and the government are bound together.

United States Culture

The American people, like all peoples, create a culture a word that used most broadly includes everything related to a people organized in a society. The United States (Culture) article discusses how Americans live the communities they build, the buildings they construct, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, their sports and recreation, celebrations, and holidays. The article then turns to the life of the mind and the spirit education in the United States and American arts and letters.

American culture has been influenced by the goal of E pluribus unum and by the democratization of American society. The people who came to the United States brought their culture with them and once here, they borrowed from each other. As the United States became the favored destination of people leaving their homelands in search of a new country, American culture became a rich and complex blending of cultures from around the world. Generation by generation, decade by decade, American culture has received infusions of new elements from Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. African Americans, for instance, brought forth the improvisational music and rhythms of blues and jazz that became the nation’s most globally popular cultural form. An American can savor the flavors and foods of many parts of the world and can hardly read a novel that does not partake of regional culture or immigrant backgrounds.

Democracy has also influenced American culture, as indicated by the gradual merging of elite and popular cultures. Nowhere has this merging had greater importance than in education. Before World War II, only a minority of Americans completed high school, and very few graduated from college. Today, graduation from high school is nearly universal, and a majority of young Americans intend to go to college. With the dramatic increase in the amount of education they receive, Americans have become enormous consumers of books, museums, and concerts. Never have so many people known so much about literature and the arts.

At the end of the 20th century, an elite no longer controls cultural expression in the United States. Artists of various kinds argue that formal boundaries between fine art and popular art have always been artificial, and they have dismantled older, European-based traditions in painting, sculpture, music, dance, and literature. Many people now contribute to a myriad of cultural forms from cartoons to public-access television programs. With creativity arising from unexpected places, American culture now reaches out to all the nation’s diverse peoples. This change has paralleled the extension of political rights to more people, including women and African Americans.

Just as the American economy and American political institutions have assumed an unprecedented position on the world scene, American cultural forms from music and movies to football and fast food to blue jeans and blues have become international in reach. No longer bound by geography, American culture has become an ambassador of goodwill, enabling people of different nations, different religions, and different forms of government to find something in common.

United States Economy

The American economy produces and Americans consume more than any other economy in the world. It also plays a pivotal role in a global economy, where the economies of all nations have to various degrees become interdependent. The article United States (Economy) first describes the workings of this economy. For example, it explains the four main factors governing production: natural resources, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship. The article also discusses the goods and services produced in the United States, the role of capital, and saving and investment in the American economy. It details how money and financial markets work, the makeup of the labor force, how the world economy affects the American economy and vice versa, and how different types of businesses from megacorporations to mom-and-pop grocery stores function in the American economy.

The Economy article also describes the economy at the end of the 20th century. It is closely aligned with several other articles on the United States. The History article shows how human choices and governmental actions have resulted in the American economy of the late 20th century. By reading the Economy and History articles together, we can see how striving for a democratic society affects many economic decisions, from raising the minimum wage to adjusting tax schedules. The Geography article discusses the tension between robust economic development and concerns about the environment. The Government article helps explain the role the political system plays in regulating the economy and shaping economic priorities. Many economic decisions, such as deregulating the airlines or imposing a hefty tax on cigarettes, must be decided at the polling place or in the legislative halls.

United States Government

Much admired in most parts of the world, the system of government devised by Americans over nearly four centuries is integral to the American experience. Like all societies, Americans have wrestled with timeless questions: What is the proper source of political authority? Who has the power to make and enforce rules by which all must live? Over the course of human history, people around the globe have invented many forms of government to answer these questions: monarchy, aristocracy, fascism, communism, democracy, and even anarchism. The American government is based on democracy a word that is easier to use than to implement effectively.

Democracy begins with the idea that government exists to serve the people and that as the source of governmental authority, the people have the right to change the government if it does not serve them justly. The people are sovereign. From that pivotal idea flow a number of complementary principles: commitment to majority rule, protection of the rights of the minority, acceptance of a rule of law, and equality of all citizens before the law. Also, democracy requires safeguarding liberties such as the free exchange of ideas and opinions, freedom of religion, freedom to assemble, and the right to be tried by a jury of one’s peers.

The article United States (Government) describes how a nation of immigrants, of many nationalities, religions, and creeds, has attempted to form one nation through the political system, emphasizing civil liberties, equality of opportunity, and equal justice before the law. Americans have disagreed sharply, and even violently, on how to interpret or achieve liberty, equality, and justice. But their political system, under the Constitution, provides mechanisms for reconciling differences and for achieving goals derived from the nation’s civil creed.

Sections of the Government article give overviews of the Constitution of the United States and provide basic information on how the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government operate. Other sections discuss the election process, political parties, state and local government, the law and courts, and crime and safety.

The United States government cannot be fully understood without knowledge of the nation’s history. Both the Government and History articles show how democracy has been an evolving concept based on political institutions that have been refurbished and modified generation by generation. At first the “we” in “We, the people” did not generally include women, Native Americans, black Americans, immigrants from Asia, 18- to 21-year-olds, or even white males who owned no land. Nearly a century and a half would pass before all of these groups gained basic civil rights through amendments to the Constitution and laws passed by Congress.

United States History

An inscription on the wall of the Chinatown History Project in New York City says: “It is true that history cannot satisfy our appetite when we are hungry, nor keep us warm when the cold wind blows. But it is also true that if younger generations do not understand the hardships and triumphs of their elders, then we will be a people without a past. As such, we will be like water without a source, a tree without roots.”

For people to understand the American experience, they must look to the past. History encompasses every aspect of society its geography, people, culture, economy, and government. Thus, the United States (History) article makes connections with, and gives greater depth to, the other articles. It also pays considerable attention to the two themes that thread their way through the other articles the process of making one nation out of its many people and the arduous work of implementing the country’s democratic principles.

The History article provides much insight into the work of making one people out of many constituent parts. It would take the work of generations of Americans to fulfill this dream and the work is not yet complete. Until slavery was abolished and former slaves were incorporated into free society, the oneness of the American people could never be accomplished. Successive waves of immigration intensified and complicated the quest for a unified people. A nearly catastrophic Civil War in the 1860s interrupted the process and perpetuated regional tensions that blocked it. Finding ways of reaching accommodation with Native Americans has remained a thorny issue to the present day. Nor could American women be fully incorporated into the society at large until they gained political rights, including the right to vote and hold office, which took until 1920.The History article also provides a wealth of material on efforts to bring all the various people who compose American society under the canopy of democracy. It describes the successive movements for reform that have taken up the uncompleted agenda first set forth by the Revolutionary generation. These movements began with the American Revolution and included social and political reform before the Civil War, populism and progressivism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the New Deal, and the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Beyond this, readers will find fascinating material that helps answer the question asked at the beginning of this introduction by French immigrant Cr?ecoeur: “What then is the American, this new man?”