

Chapter 1

America: A Short Biography

In This Chapter

- ▶ Tracing America's roots
 - ▶ Establishing a national identity
 - ▶ Dealing with growing pains
 - ▶ Fighting wars of a different kind
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Long before it was a nation, America was an idea, a dream, a fanciful tale. For most of mankind's history, it didn't exist as anything but a blank slate, waiting to be filled.

Eventually it was filled, with people who came for all sorts of reasons and with all sorts of ideas on the best way to put together a country. Sometimes the ideas clashed, and so did the people who held them. Some of the ideas were pretty bad and were discarded only after a struggle. Out of the clashes and struggles grew a country founded on a system of government that made it unique in the world.

America was lucky to have great leaders in bad times, when it most needed them. It developed a system of government that enabled it to slough off bad leaders when they came along. It had abundant natural resources, generally peaceable neighbors, and plenty of room to grow.

And boy, did it grow. But before all this could happen, someone had to transform it from a fantasy to a very real place. This chapter gives you the lowdown on how that came about and directs you to the places in the book that give you the nitty-gritty in more detail.

They Came, They Saw, They Stayed



The first Americans probably wandered over from Asia about 14,000 years ago, which in geologic terms is an eye blink ago. Over the succeeding four or five millennia, they spread out over the North and South American continents.

There weren't a whole lot of these first Americans, at least not in what became known as the United States of America, but they were wildly diverse in their customs and culture. Many of the differences had to do with the environment in which they settled. Plains Indians, for example, were semi-nomadic hunters, while tribes in the Southeast lived in semi-permanent settlements and farmed.

Fast-forward to around 985. Northern Europeans popularly known as Vikings showed up on the North American continent but stuck around only long enough to irritate the Native Americans they encountered. Within about 40 years, the Vikings gave up trying to establish a permanent foothold on the continent.

But two things — greed and imagination — prodded other Europeans into taking their place. Looking for a new route to the riches of the East (particularly spices), explorers such as an Italian weaver's son named Christopher Columbus thought they might sail west around the globe until they hit Asia.

Of course, the Americas got in the way. Rather than reverse course, Columbus and his counterparts — John Cabot, Jacques Cartier, Francisco Coronado, and a host of others — refocused their priorities to exploring and exploiting the New World.

The exploiting part of that plan included enslaving or killing off the native population. Sometimes the killing was deliberate; sometimes it was inadvertent, through the introduction of diseases for which the Native Americans had no defenses, for example. See Chapter 2 for more details on Native Americans and explorers.

Catching up to the Spanish

Spain got a head start in the Americas, mainly because the aforementioned Italian named Columbus was working for the Spanish and got them enthusiastic about it early on. But while the Spanish had a head start, other European countries eagerly sought to catch up. France split its efforts between colonizing and just carting off resources like fish and furs. But the English took steps to make their presence more permanent.

English settlements were founded for both economic and ecclesiastical reasons. In the South, colonists hoped to make money by growing tobacco, and later, cotton. To make their enterprises more profitable, they imported slaves from Africa. It was a practice that would prove far more costly in terms of human misery than the crops were ever worth.

In the North, settlers who had fled religious persecution established colonies based heavily on religious principles (although they weren't averse to making a buck). Like the Spanish, English settlers often found the easiest way to deal with those who had arrived first — the Native Americans — was to shove them aside or kill them. But the English colonists were a bit more tolerant to the arrival of other Europeans, and the American colonies grew rapidly. Chapter 3 has the stories of Pilgrims, Puritans, and entrepreneurs.

It's revolutionary!

It was probably of small comfort to the Native Americans, but the French and British also spent an inordinate amount of time killing each other. Throughout much of the eighteenth century, the two nations squared off in a series of wars that were fought in both Europe and the New World. When the dust settled, Britain had cemented its position as top dog among the European powers in North America. But a new power — whose members increasingly called themselves “Americans” — was beginning to assert itself.

Stung by slights both real and imagined from the mother country, American colonists grew increasingly restless under British control. In 1776, after a series of provocations and misunderstandings, the colonies declared themselves independent. Details about the pre-Revolution period are in Chapter 4.



The American Revolution took seven years for the colonists to win. To do so took a brilliant leader in George Washington, a timely ally in France, and healthy helpings of tenacity and luck. Chapter 5 has the details.



It also took tenacity, luck, and genius to make a country out of the victorious colonies. Over the summer of 1787, a remarkable group of men gathered in Philadelphia to draw up the rules for the new nation. The United States of America promptly flashed its precocity by electing Washington as its first president, setting up a reasonable financial system, and avoiding war with European countries long enough to get itself established. Events surrounding the drafting of the Constitution are in Chapter 6.

Putting America on the Map



Remember what I said about America being lucky to have the right man show up at the right time? Well, Thomas Jefferson is a perfect example. The multitasking Jefferson helped the country make a smooth transition from one political party being in charge to another. Plus, he had the imagination to pull off a pretty big land deal, which I get to in a moment.

But Jefferson wouldn't have won the 1800 election without the help of one of his most bitter rivals, Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton threw his political party's support to Jefferson rather than back the odious Aaron Burr, and Jefferson reciprocated by keeping a bipartisan flavor to the federal government.



It was during Jefferson's two terms that the U.S. Supreme Court asserted itself as a branch of government equal in importance to the executive and legislative branches. In a case known as *Marbury v. Madison*, the court first exercised its authority to decide whether acts of Congress and the president were constitutional.



While the various governmental branches were sorting themselves out, the country was filling up, and out. In 1803, U.S. negotiators worked out a deal to buy from France 828,000 square miles in the middle of the continent. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of America. Jefferson lost no time in sending people out West to size up the sizable new territory. See Chapter 7 for details about the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Meanwhile, in the other direction, the young country's ships were being strong-armed by pirate states in North Africa. American naval forces eventually succeeded in persuading the pirates to knock it off. But America had less success in preventing the British Navy from stopping U.S. ships and grabbing U.S. sailors for their own fleet. Jefferson responded by cutting off U.S. trade with both Britain and France.

But the embargo hurt the U.S. economy as much as the Europeans. By the time Jefferson's successor, James Madison, took office, a new group of congressmen were agitating for a shooting war. They got it, in 1812, with Britain.

For much of the war, American fortunes sagged. A U.S. invasion of Canada flopped. British troops invaded Washington, D.C., and burned the White House and other public buildings. But in late 1814 and early 1815, U.S. forces won key battles at Lake Champlain in New York and at New Orleans. Both sides basically agreed to call it a draw, and the war was over. All this is in Chapter 7 as well.

Nationalizing a nation

The end of the War of 1812 also marked the fading of the Revolution generation. People increasingly began to identify themselves as Americans rather than New Yorkers or Virginians. But it wasn't the end of tensions between sections of the country when their interests diverged.

One such area of interest was the idea of the country's central bank, which credit-dependent westerners saw as a tool of eastern financiers. Another bone of contention was the imposition of tariffs on imported goods. Northern manufacturing states thought it was a swell idea because it helped make their products more attractive. Agricultural states in the West and South despised tariffs for driving up the cost of goods.

The biggest sectional difference, however, had its roots in cotton. The invention of the cotton gin made growing the fiber in the South quite profitable. Coupled with a surge in growing sugar, Southern agriculture became a labor-intensive concern — and slaves supplied most of the labor.

Many people in Northern states opposed slavery, for a variety of moral, political, and economic reasons. A fight over the question of allowing slavery to spread was averted in 1820, with a compromise that admitted one new slave state (Missouri) and one new free state (Maine), and drew a line of latitude — the Mason-Dixon line — above which slavery was prohibited.

Beyond its borders, the United States was nervously watching European nations who were avariciously watching former Spanish colonies in Latin America gain their independence. In 1823, Pres. James Monroe formally warned Europe to keep its hands off the Americas. See Chapter 8 for more info on nationalism, sectional differences, and the Monroe Doctrine.

Dirty politics



In 1824, a crusty military-man-turned-politician named Andrew Jackson lost a hotly contested and controversial election to John Quincy Adams. In 1828, Jackson avenged the loss after one of the sleaziest campaigns (by both sides) in U.S. history.

As president, Jackson found himself confronted by a theory — most eloquently championed by South Carolina Sen. John C. Calhoun — called *nullification*. It held that states could decide for themselves which federal laws they did and did not have to obey. The theory served to deepen the divide between North and South.

A confrontation over the theory arose in 1832, when South Carolina decided it wouldn't recognize a new federal tariff. Livid with anger, Jackson threatened to send federal troops to enforce the law. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and a compromise postponed a showdown over the issue.

Reelected in 1832, Jackson tried to sink the country's only nationwide bank by ordering the withdrawal of all federal funds. Jackson viewed the bank as a tool of corrupt eastern financiers. But sagging land sales and bank panics drove the national economy into recession.

Recession or not, Americans were busy coming up with ways to make life better. Improvements in equipment triggered a boom in railroad building. The development of steel plows and rolling harvesters greatly enhanced grain production. And the invention of the telegraph signaled the start of a national communications medium.

Down in Texas, meanwhile, American expatriates led a successful revolt against Mexico and then waited for nine years to become part of the United States. The annexation of Texas, in turn, helped start another war. It's all in Chapter 8.

Fighting with a neighbor, finding gold, and heading for a breakup

In 1844, America elected its first *dark horse*, or surprise, presidential candidate. He was a Tennessean named James K. Polk. Polk was a hard worker with a yen to expand the country to the Pacific Ocean by acquiring territory from Mexico. Polk saw it as the nation's *Manifest Destiny*.

Mexico, however, saw it as intolerable bullying. After the Mexican government refused to sell, Polk sent U.S. troops to the border. A fight was quickly provoked, and just as quickly escalated into war. The Americans' quick and decisive victory resulted in their grabbing of about 500,000 square miles of Mexican territory, comprising much of what became the western United States.

Not only did that fulfill Polk's vision of Manifest Destiny, it gave California to America. That proved to be particularly fortuitous when gold was discovered there in early 1848. By the end of 1849, the California Gold Rush had sparked a human stampede and given America all the elbowroom it would need for decades.

That was a good thing, because immigration was again booming, particularly from Ireland and the European states that would become Germany. But the acquisition of Mexican territory also renewed the struggle to balance the interests of slave states and free states.

In 1850, Congress worked out a five-bill compromise. California was added as a free state. The free-or-slave question was postponed in other areas of the former Mexican lands. And a law that made it easier for slave owners to recover fugitive slaves was enacted.

While a movement to give women rights and opportunities equal to men's began to gather steam in the 1850s, the slavery issue overshadowed it. Violence broke out in Kansas and Virginia. An 1857 Supreme Court decision that held that slaves had no more rights than mules infuriated slavery opponents.

And in 1860, the badly divided country gave a plurality of its votes to a 51-year-old Illinois lawyer in a four-way race for the presidency. The election of Abraham Lincoln was the last straw for Southern states, which began leaving the Union. See Chapter 9 for accounts of the war with Mexico, the California Gold Rush, and America's divorce from itself.

Fighting among ourselves



Talk about timing: America had its best president at the worst time in its history. It was easy to underestimate Lincoln, and many did. But he had a knack for getting the best out of most of the people around him, and a self-deprecating sense of humor that disarmed others.

Lincoln was no fan of slavery, but even more important to him was repairing and preserving the Union. The North seemed well-equipped to accomplish that. It had a larger population, better manufacturing and transportation systems, and an established navy and central government. The South had the home-field advantage, better military leaders, and it only had to fight to a draw.

While the North was largely successful in establishing a naval blockade of Southern ports, the South won most of the early land battles. Its best general, Robert E. Lee, even succeeded in taking the fight to Northern territory for a while. But eventually, the North's superiority in numbers and supplies asserted itself, and the tide turned.



It took four years and 600,000 American lives for Northern forces to prevail, restore the Union, and end slavery. But less than a week after the surrender of the South's main army, Lincoln was assassinated. With him went the nation's best chance of healing its wounds. The details are in Chapter 10.

Making up is hard to do

The post-war South was a mess, and that's putting it mildly. The infrastructure was wrecked, the economy in shambles, and the best and brightest of its leaders gone. Millions of African Americans were free — with no education, no place to work, and nowhere to go.

With Lincoln gone, many of the North's leaders were more in the mood for revenge than for reconstruction. Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, had few friends in Congress and fewer leadership skills. Such a climate resulted in the North imposing draconian laws on the South, which led, in turn, to economic and physically violent reprisals by white Southerners on black Southerners.

Reconstruction efforts suffered further when the great Northern general Ulysses S. Grant turned out to be a not-so-great president. Political corruption infected every level of government. It peaked — or bottomed out — with a sleazy deal that gave the 1876 presidential election to a former Ohio governor named Rutherford B. Hayes. It's all there in Chapter 11.

Struggling with Greatness

With the North-South struggle over, America began stretching west in earnest. Great tracts of land were available to settle, and money could be made in mining, ranching, and farming.

Tragically, that meant pushing out or bumping off the original human residents. Most of America's surviving Native Americans were on the Great Plains. But by 1890, wars, murders, disease, starvation, and forced emigration had largely "solved" the "Indian problem."

Other minorities fared little better. In the South, the failures of Reconstruction led to a series of Jim Crow laws that sanctioned racial segregation. Immigration from China was temporarily banned in 1882, and the ban lasted six decades. Immigrants from other nations poured in, however, many of them populating vast slums in rapidly growing cities.

But Big Business boomed in what Mark Twain dubbed *The Gilded Age*. Railroads, steel, and oil were the objects of monopolistic cartels, and new industries sprang up around new inventions like the telephone and electric lighting.

With its frontier rapidly settled, America cast its eyes beyond its borders. In 1898, it went to war with Spain. It lasted four months, and resulted in Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines becoming U.S. territories. See Chapter 12 for details.

Finding a place in the world

As the twentieth century began, the nation marched along to the twin drums of *imperialism* — running other people's countries for our benefit — and *progressivism* — improving the bad habits of Big Business and Big Politics. At the forefront of both was a human dynamo named Theodore Roosevelt.

The country was also undergoing labor pains, with unions striving, often violently and not very successfully, with business leaders. Women were also struggling to gain a place in the polling booth and in the pay line.

Chapter 13 winds up with America trying to stay out of World War I — and failing. This turned out to be a good thing for the rest of the world, as it helped the war get over with sooner.

Roaring through the '20s

After the war, America decided to mind its own business, and restricted immigration to keep the rest of the world out. It also gave up drinking — at least legal drinking. That resulted in a lot of illegal drinking, which seemed in turn to lower the country's morals in other areas.

America also elected a string of rock-ribbed Republicans as president, all of whom did what they could to make the rich richer. Everyone else made do by buying things on installment plans and looking for ways to get rich themselves.

Americans also spent increasing amounts of leisure time going to the movies, listening to the radio, and paying homage to heroes like Babe Ruth and Charles Lindbergh. As Chapter 14 closes, the Roaring Twenties sputter to an end with a stock market crash, which makes for a depressing next chapter.

What's so great about a depression?



A whole fistful of factors helped cause the Great Depression: the stock market crash, a host of bank and farm failures, even terrible weather. It all added up to an economically catastrophic decade.

Unemployment and foreclosures soared. Tens of thousands of farm families migrated to the promise of better times in California. Minority groups were even worse off than usual. About the only groups to make progress were labor unions.

Trying to untangle the mess was a patrician New Yorker named Franklin D. Roosevelt. As president, FDR launched an alphabet's worth of federal programs to combat the Depression, with mixed results.

For Depression distractions, America had an array of demagogic politicians, dangerous criminals, and long-winded radio personalities. They're all right there in Chapter 15.

The big one

As the 1930s ended, most Americans were too preoccupied with their own problems to worry about problems in the rest of the world. As it turned out, however, the country couldn't get by indefinitely just selling war materials to friendly nations.

By the end of 1941, America was in another world war, and the country was up to the task. Industrial production ramped up. Women went to work, taking the place of men at war. Minority groups gained ground in the struggle for equality by making invaluable contributions to the effort.

American efforts overseas were even more valiant. After helping to secure North Africa, U.S. troops were at the vanguard of the allied invasions of Italy and France. In the Pacific, the military recovered quickly from the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor and began a methodical hopscotch across the Pacific. As Chapter 16 concludes, America ends the war by using nuclear weapons — and begins a very uneasy chapter in world history.

A Cold War and a Brave New World

After years of struggling with totalitarian regimes in other countries, America marked the end of World War II by beginning a period of years of struggling with different totalitarian regimes in other countries.

Instead of fascists, these were communists, especially those in the Soviet Union and, eventually, China. After helping get the United Nations off the ground, the United States began diplomatically — and sometimes not so diplomatically — dueling with communists who were trying to overthrow governments in other countries.

In 1950, UN troops, consisting mainly of U.S. troops, began what was termed a “police action,” trying to push back a Chinese-supported North Korean invasion of South Korea. It took until mid-1953, and 33,000 U.S. dead, to end the war in a stalemate.

At home, meanwhile, Americans' antipathy toward communism resulted in demagogic persecution of U.S. citizens. Commie hunting became something of a national pastime. It took until mid-1954 for a poison of innuendo and smear tactics spread by a Wisconsin senator named Joe McCarthy to run its course.

Communists aside, Americans were doing pretty well after the war. Returning veterans came home to plenty of jobs and government aid programs, and that meant a booming economy. People bought new houses and new cars in new suburban communities, where they watched a new cultural phenomenon called television and listened to a new kind of music called rock 'n' roll.

But not everyone was having fun. After helping win two world wars, African Americans decided it was past time to be treated as equals. A 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision and a 1955 boycott of a bus company helped jump-start the civil rights movement. It's all in Chapter 17.

From a Kennedy to a Ford

After eight years of Dwight Eisenhower (a great general but a pretty dull president), America was ready for some charisma in the White House. It got it with the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960. Kennedy proved his leadership skills in 1962 when he pretty much pulled the country — and the rest of the world — back from the brink of nuclear war over the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. But his assassination the following year ended the promise of his presidency.

In Kennedy's place came Lyndon B. Johnson, a practiced politician. Johnson inherited a messy U.S. involvement in a civil war in Vietnam, which grew increasingly messier in his five years in office. Anti-war sentiment grew almost as fast and kept Johnson from seeking a second full term.

At home, the civil rights movement that began in the '50s picked up speed in the '60s, fueled by a confluence of Johnson-pushed federal legislation; nonviolent demonstrations led, most notably, by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.; and the violence of race riots in many U.S. cities.

African Americans weren't the only ones protesting. Latinos, women, and gay and lesbian Americans took their grievances to the streets. Young people embraced freer attitudes toward drugs, sex, and personal appearance. Their parents, meanwhile, elected Richard Nixon president — twice.

Except for Vietnam, Nixon enjoyed reasonable success in foreign policy, warming up relations with China and gingerly seeking middle ground with the Soviet Union. After expanding the U.S. role in Vietnam by bombing targets in neighboring Cambodia, Nixon Administration officials decided it was time to exit and announced a peace settlement with North Vietnam in early 1973. At home, Nixon's paranoid fixation on getting even with political foes led to a spying-and-lying scandal that, in turn, led to him becoming the only U.S. president to resign his office.

The dirt on Watergate is at the end of Chapter 18.

Good intentions, mixed results

After Nixon quit, the country had two very good men who were not very good presidents — Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter. Ford angered many Americans by pardoning Nixon of any crimes connected with the Watergate scandal. Carter, who defeated Ford in the 1976 presidential race, angered many Americans by pardoning Vietnam War draft dodgers.

And both men had trouble with a national economy that suffered from runaway inflation and an embargo by oil-producing nations that resulted in long lines and high prices at gas stations. Carter did broker a peace deal between Egypt and Israel, but he also oversaw a mess in America's relations with Iran.



The successor to Ford and Carter was seemingly about as improbable a presidential choice as America ever made: a former B-movie actor who had served two unremarkable terms as governor of California. But Ronald Reagan turned out to have as much impact on the country as any president since FDR. He was charismatic, optimistic, stubborn, decisive, and lucky — all of which were just what the country needed to restore its self-confidence.

An ardent anti-communist, Reagan heated up the Cold War, in part by proposing an ambitious “Star Wars” military program based on laser-shooting satellites. But his tenacity, combined with tough economic and political times in the Soviet Union, pushed the Soviet bloc closer to its demise in the late '80s and early '90s.

Chapter 19 ends with the one-term presidency of George H.W. Bush, a short war with Iraq, the worst riot in a U.S. city in a century, and the election of a president whose hometown was Hope. Really.

Finishing out the century



A native of Hope, Arkansas, Bill Clinton was the nation's first president born after the end of World War II. Although he successfully pushed for a major trade agreement with Canada and Mexico and helped restore some order in the war-torn states of the former Yugoslavia, most of the Democratic president's energies were aimed at domestic issues.

A major effort to reform America's healthcare system failed, but he was more successful in working with a Republican majority in Congress to reform the welfare system. He also shone when it came to economic matters, turning a federal budget deficit into a surplus, and a 1993 tax hike into a 1997 tax cut, after he won reelection in 1996.

But in 1998, Clinton was caught lying about an affair with a White House intern. The GOP-controlled House impeached him, and he became just the second president to be tried by the Senate (Andrew Johnson was the first, in 1868). The Senate acquitted the president, mostly on the grounds that getting caught with his zipper down and trying to cover it up wasn't sufficient reason to throw him out of office.

Clinton's budgetary success was tied to the overall success of the U.S. economy in the '90s. That, in turn, was driven by technological advances (home computers, cellphones, the Internet) that helped foster tighter economic ties with the rest of the world.

But the '90s also saw the broadening of America's experience with a problem it heretofore had associated mostly with other countries: terrorism. Bombings of the World Trade Center in New York City, a federal office complex in Oklahoma City, and at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta brought home the chilling realization that America wasn't immune from horrific acts of sudden mass violence.

The country also battled the less sudden but more widespread problems of illicit drug use and the spread of AIDS. And as Chapter 20, and the twentieth century, end, America's population is not only growing larger (see Table 1-1), but older and more racially and ethnically diverse.

Table 1-1 The U.S. Population, from Early Colonization to Present Day and Beyond

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population (rounded)</i>	<i>Number of States</i>
1650	50,000	NA
1700	250,000	NA
1750	1,000,000	NA
1800	5,000,000	16
1850	23,000,000	31
1900	76,000,000	45
1950	150,000,000	48
2000	281,000,000	50
2050 (est.)	420,000,000	NA

Hanging chads and fighting wars

Chapter 21 begins and ends with presidential elections. In the first one, George W. Bush, son of a former president, won one of the closest races in U.S. history. In fact, it wasn't actually decided until seven weeks *after* the voting stopped. And even then it took a U.S. Supreme Court decision.



In the second presidential election, an Illinois senator named Barack Obama made history — not for being from Illinois or for being a senator, but for being the first African American to win the nation's highest office.

In between elections, America suffered the worst terrorist attack in modern history. The hijacked plane attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the aborted attack that ended in a Pennsylvania field, sent shock waves around the world.

The attacks resulted in a war with Afghanistan, which had harbored the mastermind behind them. That war, which was still going on seven years later, was followed in 2003 by another war, this one with Iraq. It, too, was still unresolved in 2008.

Oh, and America also suffered one of its worst national disasters *and* one of its worst economic crises.

That should be enough for any one chapter.