IN THIS CHAPTER

- Tracing America's roots
- Establishing a national identity
- Dealing with growing pains
- Fighting wars of a different kind
- Facing the new millennium

Chapter 1
America: A Short Biography

Long before it was a nation, America was an idea, a dream. 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 how to assemble a country. Sometimes, the ideas and the people clashed. But 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 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 low-down 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, maybe a lot longer. Either way, it was, in geologic terms, 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 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. Around AD 985, Northern Europeans, popularly known as *Vikings*, showed up on the North American continent, sticking around only long enough to irritate the *Native Americans*.

But two things — imagination and greed (not necessarily in that order) — 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 refocused their priorities on exploring and exploiting the New World.

The exploiting part included enslaving or killing off the native population. Sometimes, the killing was deliberate; sometimes, it was inadvertent by introducing diseases for which the Native Americans had no defenses. 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 it was the first to get enthusiastic about exploring this *New World.* But other European countries eventually sought to catch up. France split its efforts between colonizing and just carting off resources like fish and furs. However, 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 costlier in terms of human misery than the crops were ever worth monetarily.

In the North, settlers who had fled religious persecution established colonies based more on religious principles than making a buck (although they weren't averse to the latter). Like the Spanish, English settlers often found the easiest way to deal with the Native Americans was to shove them aside or kill them. The English 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 18th 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 the top dog among the European powers in North America. But a new power — whose members increasingly called themselves *Americans* — was beginning to assert itself. See Chapter 4 for the details.

Stung by slights — both real and imagined — from the mother country, American colonists grew restless under British control. In 1776, after a series of provocations and misunderstandings, the colonies declared themselves independent. 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 lowdown on what's basically the birth of the USA.

Making a country out of the victorious colonies also took tenacity, luck, and genius. 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 elected Washington as its first president, set up a reasonable financial system, and avoided war with European countries long enough to get itself established. All these events are in Chapter 6.

Putting America on the Map

Thomas Jefferson was a great example of America finding the right man at the right time. He 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 — the Louisiana Purchase. That not only doubled the size of the country, it gave Lewis and Clark a good reason for an expedition. Meanwhile, the

U.S. Supreme Court asserted itself as a co-equal branch of government. That's all in Chapter 7, along with fighting pirates and getting into another war with Great Britain.

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 among sections of the country when their interests diverged. Those divergent issues included fights over banking, tariffs — and especially slavery.

With the invention of the cotton gin, growing the fiber became quite profitable in the South. Along with a surge in growing sugar, the region became intensely dependent on slave 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 avoided, at least temporarily, with a fragile compromise in 1820.

Beyond its borders, the United States was increasingly alarmed by European nations who were thinking about grabbing former Spanish colonies in Latin America that had recently gained their independence. In 1823, Pres. James Monroe formally warned Europe to keep its hands off the Americas.

Not all the political squabbling was international. In 1824, a crusty military-man-turned-politician, 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 called *nullification*, which 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.

Despite a national recession brought on by speculation and shady financial dealings, 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.

Meanwhile, American expatriates in Texas 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. Chapter 8 covers this and much more.

Fighting with a neighbor

In 1844, America elected its first *dark horse,* or surprise, presidential candidate — James K. Polk, 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 saw it as intolerable bullying. After the Mexican government refused to sell, Polk sent U.S. troops to the border. A fight was provoked and quickly escalated into war. The Americans' rapid and decisive victory resulted in the grabbing of about 500,000 square miles of Mexican territory, comprising much of what became the western United States.

These actions not only fulfilled Polk's vision of Manifest Destiny but also gave California to America. That addition 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. However, 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 Congress enacted a law that made it easier for slave owners to recover fugitive slaves. While a movement to give women rights and opportunities equal to men's rights 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 — during the Civil War. Lincoln 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 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 and 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 postwar South was a mess, and that's putting it mildly. The infrastructure was wrecked, the economy was in shambles, and the best and brightest of its leaders were gone. Millions of Black people 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. The corruption 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 relocation 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. The conflict 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 20th century began, the nation marched to the twin drums of *imperialism* — running other people's countries for America's benefit — and *progressivism* — improving the bad habits of Big Business and Big Politics. At the forefront of both was a human dynamo — Theodore Roosevelt. The country also underwent labor pains, with unions striving, often violently and not very successfully, with business leaders. Women were also struggling to gain a place at the polling booth and in the pay line.

Chapter 13 winds up with America failing to stay out of World War I. America's participation in the war 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. Prohibition resulted in a lot of illegal drinking, which seemed, in turn, to affect the country's mores in other areas. America also elected a string of presidents, all of whom seemingly 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 spent their increasing leisure time going to the movies, listening to the radio, and paying homage to heroes like Babe Ruth and Charles Lindbergh. As Chapter 14 closed, the Roaring Twenties sputtered to an end with a stock market crash, which makes for a depressing Chapter 14.

What's so great about a depression?

A whole fistful of factors helped cause the Great Depression, from the stock market crash to bad 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

America marked the end of World War II by beginning a decades-long struggle with totalitarian regimes in two nations that had been wartime allies — the Soviet Union and China. After helping get the United Nations off the ground, the United States began diplomatically, and sometimes not so diplomatically, dueling with Soviet, Chinese, and other communists 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 Wisconsin Senator 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, which meant a booming economy. People bought houses and 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, Black people 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 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. Antiwar 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.

Blacks weren't the only ones protesting. Latinos, women, and gay 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 some success in foreign policy, warming up relations with China and gingerly seeking a middle ground with the Soviet Union. After expanding the U.S. role in Vietnam by bombing targets in 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 led to him becoming the only U.S. president to resign his office. The Watergate dirt is in 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 had ever made: a former B-movie actor who had served two so-so 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 was 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. After he won reelection in 1996, 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.

But in 1998, Clinton was caught lying about a sexual 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, cell phones, 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, of 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 to 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. As Chapter 20 (and the 20th century) ends, America and the rest of the world found themselves on the cusp of technological and economic changes that made a seemingly smaller planet spin at a faster pace.

America in the 21st Century

There's nothing like kicking off a new millennium with a nail-bitingly close presidential election, and that's where Chapter 21 begins. The contest between George W. Bush (the eventual winner) and Al Gore wasn't decided until seven weeks after

the polls closed, and only then by a 5–4 U.S. Supreme Court decision. Over the eight years of the Bush presidency, America suffered the worst terrorist attack in modern times, got into two wars, toppled one dictator, and got hit with a couple of nasty hurricanes. All in all, it's one untidy chapter.

Bursting economic bubbles

As the biggest economic calamity to hit the country since the 1930s, the Great Recession seemed to warrant its own chapter, which is what Chapter 22 is all about. People lost their houses and their jobs at dizzying rates. As it had in the Great Depression, the federal government tried to fix things with ambitious and expensive programs. And as America gradually got back on its fiscal feet, it found its economy had reshaped itself into a form that didn't fit all Americans the same.

Politics and healthcare are no tea party

In 2008, the country elected a Black man as its president for the first time. Barack Obama faced a deeply divided nation when it came to choosing which political philosophy to be guided by on issues that ranged from federal government spending to devising an efficient and broad-based healthcare system. Take a look at Chapter 23 to see how it worked out for him.

Stormy times and a new kind of president

The economy was humming along, America was still the world's most dominant country when it came to military might and cultural influence — and yet the nation was perhaps more deeply divided along ideological, political, and financial lines than it had been since the Civil War.

Part of the reason was a new president who was either loved or hated — there seemed to be no middle ground when it came to assessing Donald J. Trump. Elected in one of the biggest upsets in U.S. presidential history, Trump's approach to governing seemed to stir controversy at every turn and in nearly every part of the world.

At home, meanwhile, Americans struggled with problems that ranged from opioid addiction and gun violence to hurricanes, sexual harassment, and racial divides. It all makes for an unsettling Chapter 24.

Climate, COVID, and a capitol clash

If you thought Chapter 24 was unsettling, wait until you get to 25. America approached its *Semiquincentennial* (250th birthday) with troubling changes in its climate, a devastating illness, two of the most bitterly divisive presidential elections in its history, and an unprecedented and quite literal attack on its basic governmental processes. There were dire warnings about the country splitting up, revolution, and dictatorships. Told you it was unsettling.

Changing technology, changing America

As the new century moved along, Americans found themselves riding a wave of technological innovation that upended old ways of news-gathering, communicating, socializing, shopping, and entertaining. The new technology also crept into the country's political processes in sometimes troubling ways. At the same time, changes in both the demographics — a lot of people got a lot older — and cultural norms were dramatically reshaping who Americans were and how they lived. The new reflection is revealed in Chapter 26.