

# 35 Frequently Tested AP US History Terms & Concepts

So you want to get a 5 on the AP US History Exam? Let me tell you now that it's going to take some effort but in the end it will all be worth it. You will have studied your heart out and when you finally have that 5 in your hands then you'll realize that you've become a US history whiz. So let's get started, below you will find 35 terms that appear every year on the exam. On your quest to get that 5 it can only help you to know all of these terms and why exactly they're so important to the history of this great nation.



## The Colonial Era

### 1. Bill of Rights

After the U.S Constitution had been written and ratified there were many who still feared the strict wording of the document. The document was powerful in the power it gave to the federal government but some felt that the document granted too much power. Penned by James Madison the document assuaged the fears of those who

feared a centralized government with too much authority. Historically the Bill of Rights only referred to the first ten amendments to the Constitution guaranteeing things like freedom of speech and religion, but the Bill of Rights eventually came to represent the fluid nature of the Constitution and how nothing was set in stone. Its impact lies in the influence how it was interpreted during many historic Supreme Court cases.

## **2. Boston Massacre**

The truth surrounding the Boston Massacre has been clouded by the mists of time but we do know that for Americans of the time it was considered to be the first in escalation towards the eventual Revolutionary War. In reality, the event was more of a scuffle but the propaganda that rose around it whipped the colonies into a frenzy. What we do know about the incident is that in 1770 British troops had been sent to Boston to protect officials trying to administer legislation applied to the colonies by British parliament. A crowd led by Crispus Attucks, a slave, began to harass British soldiers who were forced to fire upon the crowd. Several Americans were killed and the episode was heralded as a turning point where colonial sentiment turned from support of the British crown towards independence.

## **3. Boston Tea Party**

The Boston Tea Party was the final straw that broke the camel's back and led began the American Revolution in earnest. The event was a protest of Parliament's Tea Act of 1773 which gave the East India Company a monopoly in selling tea in the colonies. The Sons of Liberty saw this as an intentional act to weaken the local economy and merchant class and decided that they would not stand for it. Men of Boston disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians and boarded the three East India Company ships that were held in the harbor and began to toss the tea shipment overboard. This act committed Massachusetts and the rest of the American colonies to outright rebellion.

## **4. Checks and Balances**

One of the most important concepts in the foundation of the American government checks and balances. Checks and balances was the separation of power into a three-way system that prevented one portion of the government from gaining dominance over the other two. The United States government is divided into the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branches. Each of these branches is granted a very specific scope of power that the other branches do not. Also each of the branches of government is given powers that allow it to keep its counterparts in check. The significance of this model cannot be understated because it was and continues the prevention of a seizure of absolute power by a single man which is the basis for which our nation was founded, that all men were created equal and that this is a nation of equals.

## **5. Constitution**

The U.S Constitution is one of, if not the most important documents in United States history. It established the three-branch system that the United States government has come to depend on. It instituted the Congress that is comprised of the House of Representatives and the Senate, the military power of the President of the United States, and the right of the Supreme Court to interpret the law as it applies for every citizen of the United States. Its power and influence comes from the fact that the document is not set in stone and since it was originally ratified has been amended by the Bill of Rights a total of twenty-seven times.

## **6. Declaration of Independence**

Written by Thomas Jefferson, approved by the Continental Congress in 1776, and distributed to the colonies this document embraced the official formation of a new nation. With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War Congress deemed it important to outline their reasoning for breaking from the British throne and forming their own nation of the United States of America. Within the body of the document it claimed that all men were created equal with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It also declared the crimes the British throne had committed against them

and denounced the Parliament for its treatment of the colonies. By its ratification the American colonies bound themselves on the path of self-governance and sovereignty.

## 7. House of Burgesses

The precursor to Congress it was the first form of legislative power to appear in the colonies. Formed in Virginia the House of Burgesses was established by the Virginia Company to manage and administer to the needs of colonists. It was led by burgesses who were elected officials raised from within the population of the colony itself. Its importance comes from its very nature. The House of Burgesses was the American forerunner to self-determination and it was in charge of passing rulings that would affect every member of the colony similar to how the U.S. Congress seeks to pass bills for the benefit of the whole nation.



## 8. Joint-stock companies

They are a type of business venture where any man with the resources to invest may purchase stock in the company. The amount of stock you own determines your sway in the company's dealings. This plays a key role in U.S. history because it was through the actions of many joint-stock companies that colonies were founded in North America. These English joint-stock companies sought to harvest the natural resources of North America and bring them back to England. An example of this was the venture by the Virginia Company to found a colony in the state would come to be known as Virginia.

## **9. Mercantilism**

The dominant economic theory in Europe during the period lasting from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century was known as Mercantilism. The key requirements of mercantilism came from a nation's drive to establish colonies quickly and efficiently, anything the colony produced was to be shipped and sold only in the home country, all efforts must be made for a nation's exports to be greater than its imports, and all gold and silver that the nation encounters must be hoarded and kept within the domestic money supply. This policy was the framework of the English, Spanish, and French when forming colonies in the New World.

## **10. Neutrality Act**

The Neutrality Act was a declaration by President Washington protecting the fledgling nation. During the French Revolutionary Wars, Revolutionary France had declared war on Great Britain and several other European nations in a war of conquest. Due to the alliance between the United States and France many within America felt compelled to support France in its violent acquisition of territory. President Washington prohibited any action by an American citizen to support France and stated that any such act would be prosecuted in a court of law. His argument was that America was in a defensive alliance with France and it was France who was the aggressor. Also by supporting France the United States was giving free rein to the British to attack them as well and they were simply not ready to take on a European superpower like Britain.

## **11. Order of colonization of colonies**

In order from oldest to youngest the colonies were settled first in Virginia then New York, Massachusetts, Maryland, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. Each of these colonies was founded for different reasons, cultivated different cash crops, and faced different challenges. Why is it important to know when they were colonized? They each came to the conclusion that self-determination was better for them as they each suffered their own injustices at the hands of the British crown. Had

one or two colonies decided not to turn from England and towards independence than the Revolutionary War might have taken a vastly different turn since each colony played an important role in the war effort.

## **12. Sons of Liberty**

Who were the Sons of Liberty exactly? They were a group of men who lived in Colonial America that were unhappy with the practices of the British Crown. With this in mind they were formed in order to defend the colonists from further injustices at the hands of Great Britain and combat any further taxation that they deemed unfair. Names you might recognize among the ranks of the Sons of Liberty were notable men like Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Paul Revere. Another famous member was Patrick Henry who spoke the words, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" Also you might recognize the Boston Tea Party as one of the iconic events of the Revolutionary War; the act of revolution was carried out by the Sons of Liberty.

## **13. Triangular Trade**

The triangular trade route refers to the route taken by trade ships from Africa, to the New World, and back to Europe. A ship looking to make a profit would begin in Africa and pick up a shipment of slaves to be sold in the New World. After the ship sailed across the Atlantic and it sold its shipment of slaves in the New World. These slaves would work on plantations, growing cash crops like cotton, tobacco, and sugar. The trade ships would then pick up a shipment of these cash crops to sell back in Europe which was its third stop and formed the third corner of the triangular trade. This trade system for all intents and purposes set up the system of slavery that was prevalent in the New World for centuries while at the same time enriching Europe and depopulating Africa.



# The Civil War

## 14. Articles of Confederation

Did you know that before we had the U.S Constitution we had another document that dictated how the United States would be run? It was called the Articles of Confederation and it was meant to bring the original thirteen colonies together during the Revolutionary War and act as the governing document after independence had been won. The document itself covered funding of the Continental Army, taxation, and foreign policy. However, the Articles of Confederation failed to properly unify the thirteen colonies. This is important because it led to the writing of the U.S Constitution and the empowerment of the federal government that we recognize today.

## 15. Emancipation Proclamation

Decreed by the Abraham Lincoln, president of the Union, the command free all slaves in the states that were rebelling during the Civil War. The purpose of the proclamation was to make the eradication of slavery an unambiguous and clear goal of the Civil War and Union Army. In areas where the rebellion had been pacified the Emancipation Proclamation free about 30,000 slaves and as the Union army moved into Confederate territory it set up the background for how slaves were to be freed. The act only further angered the south yet it set the Union towards not only reunification of the United States of America but the establishment of true freedom for all citizens.

## 16. Tariff of Abominations

The Tariff of 1828 was known as the Tariff of Abominations to the American South. The tariff was passed to protect the American economy from cheap English goods that were flooding in due to Napoleonic Wars preventing the English from trading with the European mainland. The tariff ended up mainly protecting the North because it created goods that competed with English manufactures. The South was mostly agrarian at the time and enjoyed the cheap trade it had with the British, but the Tariff of Abominations drove up the prices and forced the South to trade with the more expensive North. This tariff was one of the signs of the American Civil War to come because it showed the clear disunity between the North and the South that was beginning to grow.



## Reconstruction

### 17. Gilded Age

It was the period of time between 1870 and 1900 in the United States. The period got its name from Mark Twain and his novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. During the Gilded Age economic growth was rapid and robust. Wages rose explosively in the states combined with heavy industrialization pulled immigrants from Europe. The name is derived from the point that despite the economic growth in the United States



there was a deep social upheaval and unrest as African Americans were systematically disenfranchised and the American South was still devastated by the Civil War.

## **18. Roosevelt Corollary**

This piece of legislation was an addendum to the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine was a document by President James Monroe that stated any attempt by a European power to further colonize North or South America was forbidden. However, the Roosevelt Corollary made the outright declaration that if a European power tried to intervene in the affairs of North or South America the United States would exercise any and all forms of military forces it had to keep Europe out. This document was key in that it was the first serious step the United States had taken in foreign policy and turning its vision outwards past its borders.

## **19. Sherman Antitrust Act**

In what other ways did the United States protect the rights of the individual? The Sherman Antitrust Act was the first piece of legislation of its kind passed in the United States. Its purpose was to bust monopolies and cartels that protected big business and prevented the little guy from participating in the free market commerce of America. It made a broad statement that banned any form of dealings that lead to the formation of a monopoly or protected monopolistic practices. It also forbade any practices that were anticompetition in nature and in some ways was more meant to protect competition in general and in this way keep the consumer protected as well.

## **20. “Speak softly, and carry a big stick.”**

A phrase made famous by President Theodore Roosevelt, it is an essential summation of President Roosevelt’s foreign policy during his presidency. The phrase refers to how President Roosevelt dealt with encounters between Europe and the fledgling nations that had begun to sprout in South American from former colonies. It comes from the fact that President Roosevelt would always calmly approach deliberation and negotiations peacefully but he backed up his claims with a “big stick” or the brand new United States Navy. A prime example of this was President Roosevelt’s Great

White Fleet composed of 16 brand new battleships that sailed around the world to show that the United States was now a power to be reckoned with.

## **21. Transcontinental Railroad**

The Transcontinental railroad was the physical manifestation of the American dream of Manifest Destiny. One end started in San Francisco and the other started in Iowa on the Missouri River. It was a railroad that linked the east coast with the west coast, but was simultaneously more than that as well. By bringing together the east and west coast via land route the formerly intimidating and dangerous west was opened up to more regular settlement. In addition, trade was facilitated because you no longer had to move goods via ship but instead could rely on the railroad to move product. States that formerly seemed inaccessible due to the amount of time it took to get there and the danger that came with the overland route were made secure by the existence of a reliable railroad.



# **World War I to World War II**

## **22. Wilson's 14 Points**

During the United States' entry into World War I, President Wilson thought it prudent to outline what exactly were the goals of the United States. By the time the United

States saw combat Europe was already firmly entrenched in the fighting but most participating nations had not made it clear as to what their intentions were after the completion of the war. In President Wilson's 14 points he described the type of world he hoped to build which included free trade between all nations, open navigation of the seas, and the formation of the precursor to the United Nations: the League of Nations. His points were seen to be idealistic and not really taken seriously, but it was important in President Wilson's eyes to establish that the United States was not entering the war for economic gain. Had his 14 points been better received then perhaps we might have avoided World War II.

## **23. Great Depression**

It was the worst economic crisis of the 1930s. The Great Depression lasted the longest and was the deepest economic slump the entire world was in during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in the United States and following the economic boom of the Roaring '20s it started with the stock market crash in October 1929 that came to be known as Black Tuesday. The United States had an unemployment rate of 25% and many Americans were forced to work backbreaking, manual labor jobs. It was only with the policies of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and looming approach of World War II that the United States was able to recover from this economic downturn.

## **24. Manhattan Project**

The Manhattan Project was the endeavor undertaken by the United States to create the first atomic weapons. Who led the creation of some of the most powerful weapons in human history? The actual scheme was led by the premiere physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer. The bulk of the engineering and design took place at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. However, in order to create these weapons they needed to enrich uranium and this was done in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The end result of the project was the creation of two atomic bombs, Little Boy and Fat Man, which were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively leading to the end of the war in the Pacific Theater.

## **25. Potsdam Conference**

Ever wonder how the Allies dealt with Germany after they had surrendered? All the Allied leaders at the time decided that they would meet in Potsdam and determine Germany's fate. Nine weeks prior had been V-E Day which was the official closure of the Western theater, but a lot had changed since then. The United States had a new president, President Truman had taken the presidency because President Roosevelt had died during his fourth term. Winston Churchill who had led Britain through the war had finally been replaced by Clement Atlee. Finally, Stalin's forces occupied all of Eastern Europe all the way up to Eastern Germany. The Potsdam Conference was markedly different from the Yalta Conference for President Truman had developed a deep mistrust of Stalin's plans for his newborn superpower. This was in contrast to President Roosevelt who believed that Stalin was harmless and would work with him to create a new democratic world.

## **26. Scopes Monkey Trial**

The Scopes Monkey Trial can be called the first instance of religion versus science in the United States. It begins with a substitute biology teacher who unwittingly taught evolution in a Tennessee high school. The Butler Act had made it illegal to teach any form of evolution in a Tennessee school that received money from the state. Major figures in the American political landscape at the time came from all over to partake in this debate. Clarence Darrow defended the John Scopes, the teacher accused of the crime, and against him stood William Jennings Bryan. The case itself was made even larger as major newspapers came from all over the country to cover the trial. In the end John Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100, but the main takeaway was that this event was the first time religion and science would butt heads and it certainly would not be the last in American history.

## **27. Teapot Dome Scandal**

Ever wonder if there was a scandal that preceded the Watergate scandal in notoriety? From 1921 to 1923 the United States turned its attention inwards toward Wyoming. When the Navy began using oil instead of coal President Taft deemed it wise that the Navy always have a reliable source of fuel and set aside specific oil-producing

portions of the nation specifically for the Navy. One of these areas was the Teapot Dome Oil Field in Wyoming. The land's lease was changed hands from the U.S Navy to private oil companies and behind it all was the Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall. The scandal lies in that Secretary Fall essentially offered the lease to private companies in exchange for personal bribes. This was the first instance of an American administration trying to hide a scandal from the American Public.

## 28. Yalta Conference

Do you ever wonder who brought Europe back to its feet after World War II? Just as World War II was entering its final stages the three major powers in the war, the United States, Great Britain, and Russia, all met to determine how to deal with the post-war recovery. Those who were in attendance were the respective nations' leaders, President Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin. The conference determined how Germany was to be dealt with after the war. This included how Germany would pay off its war debts, its demilitarization, and the decision to hunt down Nazi war criminals. The Yalta Conference also decided what was to be done with all the land Stalin had appropriated during his march west. While he promised that democratic elections would be held he never fulfilled his promise from this we can see the beginning of the Iron Curtain.



# The Cold War

## 29. Bay of Pigs

During the Cold War Cuba was at a crossroads. Fidel Castro led a left-wing government that supported the Soviet Union and was looking to cultivate further ties with them. He had come to power after usurping the democratic, but corrupt, President Fulgencio Batista. Apprehensive about Castro's left-wing sympathies President Eisenhower ordered the but the final stamp of approval was given by President Kennedy. The invasion ultimately failed and the United States was embarrassed on the international stage while simultaneously granting Cuba's new political system legitimacy. The significance of this event is that it would eventually bring the Cold War to a head at the Cuban Missile Crisis.

## 30. Cuban Missile Crisis

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the height of tension during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. It arose as the result of the United States' failed ploy to topple the left-wing government of Cuba and Cuba seeking aid from further intervention by the United States requested that the Soviet Union arm the island nation with nuclear missiles pointed towards the United States. In response the United States strategically placed its own nuclear arsenal in Turkey and Italy aimed towards Moscow. The crisis ended with negotiations between Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy. The United States agreed never to attempt to subjugate Cuba again and promised to remove their own nuclear weapons from Turkey and Italy if the Soviet Union removed theirs in Cuba. This was the culmination of tension that had been building during the Cold War and from this point forward pressure began to relax.

## 31. Détente

Détente was the beginning of easing of tensions during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. It began with the installation of the direct hotline between Washington D.C. and Moscow in order to properly facilitate quick, precise

communication between the leaders of both nations. This thawing of relations between the two superpowers was brought about by events such as the Strategic Arms Limitation talks and the signing of the Helsinki Accords. Both were efforts taken by the participating superpowers to reduce their ballistic missile arsenal and the Soviet Union's guarantees to allow Eastern European countries the right of self-determination. Détente was the first time during the Cold War that both superpowers realized that the continued escalation might lead to a potentially devastating nuclear war and the destruction of both their nations.

## **32. Domino Theory**

Domino Theory was a concept that dominated United States legislation and the national consciousness from the 1950s to the 1980s. It was the belief that during the Cold War if one country fell to Communism then it would begin to affect all the countries around it leading to the explosive growth of communism. It outlined that there would be a "domino effect" where if China fell to communism then it would be followed by Korea then Vietnam and so on till all of Asia was under the spell of the Soviet Union. The weight the theory carried comes from how it dominated American foreign policy through the duration of the Cold War and its interventionist procedures that led to the Korean and Vietnam War.

## **33. Red Scare**

The Red Scare refers to the period of time between 1947 to the early 1950s. During this period the American national consciousness was inundated with fear regarding all things communist. This was brought on by the raising of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe, the news of a Chinese Civil War set to determine the type of government China would have, and the damage to American security by Soviet espionage. The main figure at the heart of all this fueling the flames of fear was Senator Joseph McCarthy. Led by Senator McCarthy the United States began a period of fear-mongering and repression against those who professed even the slightest sympathy for Communists.

## 34. Tonkin Incident

The Vietnam War began with the Tonkin Incident. In August 1964 a military engagement between the USS Maddox fired upon three North Vietnamese torpedo boats and the aftermath saw Vietnamese casualties and none on the American side. Why exactly is this important? Back in the United States the Tonkin Incident was painted in such a way to make Vietnam the aggressor and the United States was merely defending itself. As a result of this distortion of events Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the power to deploy American forces in the event a southeast Asian country asked for help defending itself from Communist influence, and from this stems the beginning of the Vietnam War.

## 35. Truman Doctrine

During the Cold War the United States took an aggressive stance against the Soviet Union and Communism in general. The Truman Doctrine was the foreign policy adopted by the Truman administration. It stated that the United States would make its best effort to contain communism in Europe and prevent its spread to Asia and eventually to the rest of the world. It is because of this policy that the United States took on the role of international policeman and due embroiled itself in several military conflicts from post-World War II to the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union.

From the colonial period to the present the United States has had a rich history. Every event listed here was a key turning point in the American story and each concept described affected American lives. This country was born in the midst of conflict, but through the American spirit and hard work we forged ourselves into a mighty superpower. If you truly want to understand how the United States then you want to make sure you know every item on this list. If you do then that perfect score on the AP US History exam will be within your grasp.

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