

Fiche

1. Basic facts

Capital city	Washington D.C. (District of Columbia)
Currency	US dollar (\$)
The national flag	<i>The Star Spangled Banner</i> or <i>Stars and Stripes</i> It is composed of 50 white stars (to symbolise the 50 states) and 13 red and white stripes (to symbolise the 13 original colonies).
The national anthem	<i>The Star Spangled Banner</i>
National emblems	The American Great Seal (sceau) the bald eagle (aigle) Uncle Sam the Statue of Liberty
National mottoes	<i>e pluribus unum</i> (out of many, one is the idea of the melting pot) in God we trust
Public holidays	3 rd Monday in January: Martin Luther King Day 4 th July: Independence Day 1 st Monday in September: Labour Day 12 th October: Columbus Day 4 th Thursday in November: Thanksgiving

2. American institutions

The Government	Executive power	The President: elected for a four year term; lives in the White House; is the Head of State The Cabinet (Attorney General; Vice President; Secretary of State; Secretary of Defense; Secretary of the Treasury)
	Judicial power	The Supreme Court: ensures that the laws respect the Constitution
	Legislative power	Congress = the Senate (100 members) + the House of Representatives (435 members)
Official documents	The Declaration of Independence (1776)	
	The Pledge of Allegiance (1892): recited by schoolchildren every day	
	The Constitution (1787) → 27 Amendments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13th Amendment (1865) = abolition of slavery; • 15th Amendment (1870) = right to vote for all men, whites and blacks; • 19th Amendment (1919) = right to vote for women; • 26th Amendment (1971) = right to vote at 18. 	
	The Bill of Rights (1789: first 10 amendments) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1st Amendment = freedom of speech, of religion, etc. 	

- 2nd Amendment = the right to bear arms

3. Concepts

The Frontier	The imaginary line between the civilized world (settled territory) and the wilderness (Indian territory). As the pioneers travelled westwards, the Frontier receded.
The Trail of Tears	As the pioneers pushed the Frontier further and further westwards, the Indians (native Americans) became more and more of a problem for the White settlers. In 1830 the Indian Removal Act authorized the forcible deportation of Cherokee and Seminole tribes. More than 100,000 Indians were made to abandon their villages and to travel from Georgia to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi.
Slavery	Between the 16 th and 19 th centuries, 12 million Africans were shipped as slaves to the Americas, 645,000 to the USA to work on the tobacco and cotton plantations in the south. At the end of the 18 th century, the concept of 'free states' (in the north) and 'slave states' (in the south) was developed. By 1860 the slave population in the USA had reached 4 million. 1865 at the end of the Civil War: the 13 th Amendment marked the abolition of slavery.
The American Dream	A dream of freedom and justice for all, equal opportunities and the pursuit of happiness. The belief that America offers everyone the chance to fulfil themselves and realise their dreams.
The work ethic	The belief that through hard work everyone will succeed and climb the social ladder.
Deep South	Caroline, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana: these southern states supported and practised slavery. They formed the Confederacy during the Civil War (1861-1865), which they lost.
The Underground Railroad	The network of secret routes used by the slaves to flee the Deep South and to travel north to the free states and Canada.
'Jim Crow' laws	Laws passed by the southern states in 1877 after the Civil War to prevent Blacks (former slaves) from voting and to enforce segregation in public places. Until the 1960s, in the south the Blacks had to use separate water fountains, schools, restaurants and public libraries, as well as being segregated on public transport.
The melting pot	The image used to describe the assimilation of immigrants of multiple origins who assume a common identity as 'American citizens'.
McCarthyism	The name given to the witch hunt in the 1950's during the Cold War when the USA feared the arrival of Communism from Eastern Europe. Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed to have a list of communists and accused thousands of people of being Communist sympathizers. A significant number of artists and Hollywood film directors were blacklisted including Charlie Chaplin and Arthur Miller.

4. Places of power

The White House	Official residence of the President of the United States
The Pentagon	Headquarters of the Secretary of the Defence and the American Army
New York Stock Exchange	Financial centre of the stock market on Wall Street
The Ivy League	The name given to the network of the older prestigious American universities on the East coast.
Silicon Valley (near San Francisco)	Home to the American IT industry. (IT = Information Technology)

5. Key dates

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1619	The first British colony, Virginia, starts importing African slaves
1861–1865	The American Civil War. The industrial 'Union States' in the north led by Abraham Lincoln fought the 'Confederate States' in the south. The southern states did not want to abolish slavery and so intended to secede from the United States. 1862 Lincoln proclaimed the abolition of slavery. 1865 The last slaves were freed.
1920's – 1930's	Harlem Renaissance An artistic movement which encouraged the development of black literature, theatre, art and music, especially jazz. As a consequence, black identity became an integral part of American cultural identity. Significant contributors to the movement: Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes.
1947	Marshall Plan President Truman developed the Marshall Plan to help Europe regain economic health and prevent the spread of communism: the US gave western European countries significant financial aid to rebuild their economy.
1964–1975	the Vietnam War The US government sent American troops to intervene in the Vietnam conflict because they feared the spread of communism. Although they were well equipped, the American forces were unable to take control and suffered their first military defeat. Back home, there was considerable opposition to the American involvement in the war. The anti-war movement inspired by protest singers such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez gave birth to 'Flower Power' which became a worldwide counterculture movement.
1969	Woodstock The most famous rock festival ever. A three-day event during the hippie era with names like Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Joan Baez, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. It was emblematic of the American counterculture during the tension over the Vietnam War and the racial conflicts of the 1960s.
2001	9/11 Terrorists used planes to destroy the World Trade Centre (Twin Towers) in New York and to attack the Pentagon in Washington D.C. Nearly 3000 people lost their lives. The USA reacted by declaring war on terrorism and intervening in Iraq and Afghanistan.

6. National hero: Martin Luther King

- Martin Luther King (1929–1968) was a Baptist minister in Montgomery, Alabama, where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus and was arrested. Martin Luther King organized a boycott of the transport system, which led to the abolition of segregation on buses in 1956.

- Inspired by Gandhi's principles of non-violent civil disobedience, Martin Luther King went on to become the leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

On August 28th 1963 he made his 'I have a Dream' speech at the end of a march on Washington to demand equality for all citizens. The march led to the Civil Rights Act in 1965 making any form of racial discrimination illegal. Martin Luther King received the Nobel Peace Prize the same year.

- He was assassinated in 1968 by a white supremacist.

- The Americans now observe Martin Luther King Day on the third Monday of January.