



## THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

### FACTS AND FIGURES

- ▶ **Official name:** The United States of America.
- ▶ **Capital:** Washington, DC: District of Columbia (not to be confused with Washington State on the Pacific coast).
- ▶ **Emblem:** The stars and stripes of the flag (adopted in 1777) and the eagle, a symbol of power.
- ▶ **Population:** 260 million people. Native Americans represent 0.8% of the population today (there were over 2 million people and over 1,000 tribes in the 15th c., decimated by wars, massacres, disease, bad living conditions on reservations). They were granted full rights of citizenship in 1953. They are fighting to get some of their land back. Their average income is still one of the lowest. The Whites are the predominant group (over 80% of the population) with the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, descendants of the first white settlers who colonized the country), and non WASPs, from Ireland, Southern Europe and Slavonic countries. African-Americans number 30 million. Despite the fact that there are successful Black people, many are still struggling hard to make it. Some have even fallen back since the recession of the 80's and life in ghettos (the inner cities of major urban centres) is very difficult (poverty, crime, drugs). Hispanics are all the people whose mother tongue is Spanish. They are a young fast-growing group (about 60 million) and will soon be the largest American minority. They are people of very different origins and ranks (Puerto-Ricans, citizens by birth; undocumented Mexicans staying illegally in the country; educated and wealthy Cubans; poor "Bolseros" from Cuba...). Asians (7.3 million) are mostly concentrated on the West Coast, some had been there since the 1850's and many more came to America after World War II and the Vietnam War. They are rather well integrated and often considered as a successful minority.

▶ **Major cities:** New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Dallas/Fort Worth, Miami.

▶ **Economy:** The USA is the largest agricultural producer in the world with an agricultural trade surplus of 16.5 billion dollars. It is a major producer of oil\* (but still needs to import), of gas and coal\*, the second largest production of silver, gold and copper\*. Its industry is powerful with a leading position in many sectors (aerospace, communications, electronics, armaments). Production is often concentrated in a specific geographical area: the manufacturing belt of the North-East, the car industry in Detroit, aeronautics in the West (Seattle).

## HISTORY

▶ **1492:** Christopher Columbus discovers an island in the West Indies. Colonization of the “New World” is about to begin.

▶ **1607:** Jamestown: first English town in Virginia.

▶ **1619:** First legislative assembly, introduction of slavery in Jamestown.

▶ **1620:** Fleeing from religious persecution in England, the “Pilgrim Fathers” sail across the Atlantic on board the Mayflower and land near Cape Cod.

▶ **1764-1775:** Relations between England and its colonies deteriorate.

▶ **1775-1783:** War of Independence or the American Revolution.

▶ **1776 (July 4th):** Declaration of Independence (a national holiday today).

▶ **1800-1880:** Major wave of immigrants from Europe.

▶ **1789-1890:** Expansion westward, “Conquest of the West”.

▶ **1849:** The Gold Rush (“Forty-niners”: people attracted by the prospects of gold in the West).

- ▶ **1890:** The “Frontier” is officially closed, Native Americans are defeated.
- ▶ **1861-1865:** The Civil War between the Southern States (the Confederates) and the Northern States (the Yankees).
- ▶ **1865-1877:** Reconstruction era.
- ▶ **1880-1924:** Further waves of immigration from Southern Europe and Slavonic countries.
- ▶ **1924:** The “Quota Laws”, restrictive immigration policies.
- ▶ **1917:** The USA enters World War I.
- ▶ **1920’s:** The “Roaring Twenties”, period of prosperity.
- ▶ **1929:** “Black Thursday”, the Great Depression starts with the Wall Street Crash. F.D. Roosevelt’s New Deal helps the country out of the crisis, along with war effort.
- ▶ **1941:** Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the USA enters World War II.
- ▶ **1950’s:** Post-war period, the Cold War and the “Witch-hunt” of McCarthyism.
- ▶ **1950-1953:** Korean War.
- ▶ **1961-1973:** Vietnam War (two “containment\*” wars against communism).
- ▶ **1989:** Collapse of the Berlin Wall and of the Eastern Bloc. Talk of a New World Order.
- ▶ **1991:** Gulf War against Iraq.
- ▶ **1992:** Election of Bill Clinton (a democrat) NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) signed by Canada, Mexico and the USA.
- ▶ **1994:** NAFTA comes into effect. Republican landslide victory\* in midterm elections.

## GOVERNMENT

- ▶ **The American Constitution:** It was written by the Founding Fathers (G. Washington, B. Franklin, J. Madison, T. Jefferson) and adopted in Philadelphia in 1787. It defined the presidential system with three distinct branches. In 1789, George Washington became the first American President. The first ten Amendments to the Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights and guarantee the American people some fundamental rights (1st Amendment: freedom of speech, worship and assembly; 2nd: right to bear arms; 7th: right to be judged by a jury). There are now 26 Amendments (13th in 1865: abolition of slavery; 26th in 1971: voting age is).
- ▶ **The executive:** The President serves a maximum of two four-year terms. He approves or rejects the bills\* from Congress, has a right of veto (the budget must be approved by Congress). He can be impeached\* in case of crime or treason. He continues to hold office even if his party loses midterm elections and majority in one or two of the Houses in Congress (which is President B. Clinton's case at the present time). A Governor in each state has executive power.
- ▶ **The legislature:** The Congress on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC is composed of two houses: the House of Representatives (congressmen) elected for two years and the Senate (two senators per state elected for six years with a third renewed every two years). They are in charge of the passing of laws and investigation\* committees when necessary.
- ▶ **The judiciary:** The Supreme Court with nine justices decides if laws conform to the Constitution, and its rulings\* on some cases (which can be brought to the Court by individuals) become references.
- ▶ **Main parties:** The Democratic Party favours some intervention from the government in economic and social matters. The Republican Party (or GOP, Grand Old Party) supports the idea of economic growth through deregulation, free enterprise and personal initiative. Its right-wing elements are pushing today for very conservative measures on health, social security and family planning (against abortion).
- ▶ **Lobbying:** Pressure groups try to influence policy-making and defend specific interests (business, trade, ethnic groups, women's rights, environmentalists, consumer protection).



# THE UNITED KINGDOM

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- ▶ **Official name:** The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Great Britain: England, Wales and Scotland.
- ▶ **Capital:** London, pop. almost 8 million.
- ▶ **Emblem:** The rose for England, the thistle\* for Scotland, the leek\* for Wales. St George killing the dragon also symbolizes England's power. The monarch's motto\* is "Mon Dieu et mon Droit".
- ▶ **Population:** 58 million. With Germany, the UK is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe. Five sixths of the population live in England and 88% in cities. Immigrants from former colonies (India, Pakistan, the West Indies) have changed the face of the country, especially in urban centres.
- ▶ **Major cities:** London is the largest of the country's major cities, which include Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland, Cardiff and Swansea in Wales.
- ▶ **Economy:** The UK is the fifth industrial power in the world with industries employing only 25% of the working population (70% are in the service sector). In the 19th c. the country was the most powerful industrial country in the world, it had a large empire (on which the sun never set\*!), and the Industrial Revolution had deeply affected the society (once mainly peasants, people had become factory workers and were concentrated in cities). After the first World War, major economic difficulties started (world crisis, competition with other countries, unemployment, lack of investment). In the 1970's-1980's, the crisis worsened\*, entire industrial areas, in the North especially, became depressed with very high unemployment figures, long bitter strikes\* to try and prevent closures of mines, for instance. Since the late 1980's,

some recovery has been achieved with modernization of certain industries (British Steel for example), foreign investment (in the car industry with Japanese firms), incentives to attract companies in depressed areas, privatization of formerly state-owned companies (higher competitiveness in communications, air transport), and active financial markets.

## HISTORY

- ▶ **1st c. AD:** Roman conquest of the island inhabited by Celts, limited to the South and the Midlands. Hadrian's wall built in the north to contain the Picts and the Scots.
- ▶ **4th c.:** Beginning of Christianization.
- ▶ **407:** End of Roman England. Invasion by the Angles and the Saxons. Celts were pushed to the north and the west.
- ▶ **1017-35:** Anglo-Saxon monarchy overthrown by the Danes.
- ▶ **1066:** Invasion by William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy. Norman victory at the Battle of Hastings.
- ▶ **1215:** Magna Carta imposed on the King by rebel barons; foundation of parliamentary system.
- ▶ **1337:** Beginning of the Hundred Years' War with France. (1453: Calais, sole remaining English possession on the Continent).
- ▶ **1450-1485:** War of the Roses between the houses of Lancaster and York.
- ▶ **1509-1547:** Reign of Henry VIII. Reformation under the Tudors.
- ▶ **1558-1603:** Reign of Elizabeth I, establishment of Anglicanism, defeat of the Catholics, expansion and great maritime power (victory over the Spanish Armada).
- ▶ **1642-49:** Puritan opposition to King Charles I who was defeated by Oliver Cromwell and beheaded in 1649.

- ▶ **1649-53/1653-58:** Republic and Protectorate of England. Ireland and Scotland both defected in 1649, 1651 by Cromwell who ruled the country as a dictator (extremely strict ways of the Puritan period).
- ▶ **1714:** The beginning of a new dynasty, the Hanover family, who contributed to the decrease in sovereign power throughout the 18th c. in favour of powerful landowners and the liberal Whig Party.
- ▶ **1776-88:** American Revolution.
- ▶ **1800:** Act of Union with Ireland.
- ▶ **1837-1901:** Reign of Queen Victoria. The Victorian era is one of prosperity, expansion and power (industrialization of the country, first economic and colonial power in the world).
- ▶ **1876:** Proclamation of the British Empire of the East Indies (India, the “jewel” of the empire).
- ▶ **1931:** The Commonwealth of Nations replaced the Empire (decolonization process culminating in the independence of India, 1947).
- ▶ **1940:** With Winston Churchill (“We shall never surrender\*”), war against Nazi regime.
- ▶ **1945-51:** Labour\* victory and social reforms. (Labour government again in 1964).
- ▶ **1952:** Elizabeth II was crowned.
- ▶ **1973:** Membership in the EEC voted.
- ▶ **1979:** Conservative Party victory of Margaret Thatcher, reelected in 1983 and 1987.
- ▶ **1982:** Falklands War (dispute over the Falkland Islands claimed by Argentina) and British victory.
- ▶ **1990:** Leadership contest for Margaret Thatcher and her resignation. John Major became Prime Minister (re-elected in 1994).

- ▶ **1993:** Ratification of the Maastricht Treaty; the Channel tunnel (“Chunnel”) opened in 1994.

## GOVERNMENT

- ▶ **Parliamentary monarchy:** It dates back to the 13th c. There is no written constitution. The sovereign today has symbolic power; Queen Elizabeth II is head of the Anglican Church and of the Commonwealth. She opens the parliamentary session in the House of Lords with the Speech of the Throne, and is kept informed on government actions by the Prime Minister and his Cabinet.

- ▶ **The Parliament:** There are two houses, the House of Commons where MP’s (Members of Parliament, 650) discuss bills\*, and the House of Lords with limited powers (composed of hereditary peers and life peers, chosen by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister).

- ▶ **The Prime Minister:** The PM is the true head of state. He (she) is the leader of the party that has won the general election, held every five years, and so has the majority in the Commons. The Cabinet is a limited number of ministers or secretaries responsible for key decisions.

- ▶ **Main parties:** The two main parties are the Conservative (or Tory) Party, now in power since 1979 and the Labour Party. The Liberal Democrats (or the Alliance) may challenge the two-party system.

### Mots difficiles

*thistle:* chardon  
*leek:* poireau  
*motto:* devise

*set:* se couchait  
*worsened:* s’aggrava  
*strikes:* grèves



# IRELAND

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- ▶ **Official name:** Eire (Ireland is often called the “Emerald Isle” because of its wet climate and green pastures).
- ▶ **Capital:** Dublin, pop. over 1 million.
- ▶ **Emblem:** the shamrock (a type of clover\*).
- ▶ **Population:** Over 3.5 million, concentrated in or around major cities. It totalled 6.5 million in 1841. Emigration, during and after the Great Famine, caused a terrible drop in population figures, many immigrants being young and unmarried; this also led to a decline in birth rates. The Irish are descended from the Celts and also from the Vikings (Dublin was first a Viking settlement and city), the Normans and the English. Because of English rule for centuries, the old Gaelic language almost disappeared but since 1921 the government has tried to revive it by making it a compulsory\* subject at school. 95% of the population is Roman Catholic, with a lot of people still having very strict views concerning family planning (abortion\* is forbidden, contraception, until recently, was banned too; people voted yes in a 1996 referendum on divorce, by a small margin though).
- ▶ **Major cities:** Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford.
- ▶ **Economy:** For centuries, it depended largely on agriculture and cereal growing for cattle\*. The famine of the 1840’s was due to failure of the potato crop. As a result, the poor Irish suffered starvation even though cereals were grown in the country, but for cattle and export, mainly to England. People still feel very bitter\* today when thinking about those times of hardships and destitution. 68 % of the agricultural land consists of pastures, 14 % of the land can be farmed with barley\*, wheat, potatoes, sugar beets and tobacco as the main crops\*.

Barley is used by the brewing and distilling industry (whiskey, beer: Guinness). Since the 1960's, industry has been more active. Foreign industries have been encouraged to settle in Ireland with incentives such as cash or tax concessions. Most of the goods manufactured by foreign companies (over a third from the USA) are exported (computers, pharmaceuticals, textiles). Entry into the EC boosted the economy giving Irish firms access to a vast market. Agricultural processing industries have also been stimulated. Mining does not account for much in the country's GNP, tourism accounts for 3.5%. In the 1990's, however, the economy is still lagging\* compared to other EC nations, with one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe. Immigration is still a common feature of the country.

## HISTORY

- ▶ **5th c:** Saint Patrick Christianized the island, inhabited by Celts. (Ireland is still a predominantly Catholic country.)
- ▶ **1169:** First Anglo-Norman invasions, "colonization" started.
- ▶ **1649-50:** Oliver Cromwell came to break Irish resistance, he massacred people or deported them.
- ▶ **1690:** The Battle of the Boyne, a major Protestant victory. The English King, William of Orange crushed the Catholic rebellion (to this day, it is celebrated by Protestants in Northern Ireland; "Orangemen" are Protestant extremists).
- ▶ **1800:** The Act of Union abolished the Irish parliament and united the two countries. Protestants Loyalists refused "Home Rule", that is to say an independent united Ireland.
- ▶ **1829:** Catholics were admitted to Parliament and could hold public office for the first time.
- ▶ **1845-50:** The Great Famine (failure of the potato crop, the staple food\* of poor Irish). Mass emigration started to the USA and other English-speaking countries. 1 million people died.

- ▶ **1870's:** Supporters of a free Ireland campaigned for Home Rule.
- ▶ **1900:** Creation of Sinn Féin (Gaelic for “we ourselves”), Irish nationalists intensified campaigns for independence.
- ▶ **1916:** Easter Rising, the British army crushed an uprising, killing Republican leaders and starting Civil War.
- ▶ **1919:** Creation of the IRA, Irish Republican Army, a military organization.
- ▶ **1921:** The British were forced to “partition” Ireland that became the Irish Free State. Six counties of the Northern Ulster Province, with a majority of Protestants remained under British rule, which is still true today.
- ▶ **1937:** The country is renamed Eire under Prime Minister de Valera.
- ▶ **1949:** further ties with Great Britain are broken as the Republic of Ireland is proclaimed and the country leaves the Commonwealth (British economic association of former colonies).
- ▶ **1973:** Joins the EC.
- ▶ **1985:** Anglo-Irish agreement to try and solve the conflict in Northern Ireland (see specific issues in Government, below, for further\* explanations on the Troubles there).

## GOVERNMENT

- ▶ **Parliamentary democracy:** The Chief of State is the President, elected every seven years. Mary Robinson became the first female president in 1990. Real power is held by the Head of Government, i.e the Prime Minister and by the Parliament, composed of two houses: the House of Representatives (the Dáil) has 166 members elected every five years, the Senate (the Seanad) has 60 members, 49 of whom are selected from representatives of industry, education agriculture, administration, etc., and 11 nominated by the Prime Minister. The two

main political parties are the Fianna Fáil and the Fine Gael. Voting age is 18. Local government is in the hands of county councils and boroughs (the five main cities) responsible for all local issues but education and the police.

► **Specific issues:** Dublin and London try to work together to find solutions to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Catholic minority there wants to be reunited with Ireland, the Protestants are Loyalists or Unionists and want to remain British. The 1994 ceasefire signed by the IRA first, then by the Protestant paramilitary groups, gave hope to the population both in Ulster and in Ireland but these hopes were shattered\* in February 1996 when bombs blew up in London once more, seriously compromising the peace deal. Some people in Ireland think reunification with Ulster would be a drain\* on the economy and are reluctant\* to undertake it.

#### Mots difficiles

*clover:* le trèfle

*compulsory:* obligatoire

*abortion:* avortement

*cattle:* bétail

*bitter:* amères

*barley:* orge

*crops:* récoltes

*lagging:* à la traîne

*staple food:* nourriture de base

*further ties:* d'autres liens

*shattered:* brisés

*a drain:* un poids

*reluctant:* réticent.



# SOUTH AFRICA

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- ▶ **Official name:** Republic of South Africa.
- ▶ **Capitals:** Pretoria (government), pop. over 1 million. Cape Town (parliament), pop. 2.6 million.
- ▶ **Population:** 41 million. Black Africans represent 74% of the population, the main groups being the Bantus, the Xhosas, the Hottentots and the Zulus. The Whites represent about 14%. There are, on the one hand, Afrikaners (descendants of mainly Dutch, German and French Protestant settlers, formerly called “Boers”, meaning peasant in Afrikaans, a language based on old Dutch still spoken today) and, on the other, there are descendants of British settlers who came in large numbers in the early 19th c. People of mixed descent make up 9% and Asians 3%. Half the population is concentrated in large urban centres and vast tracks of the country are uninhabited.
- ▶ **Major cities:** Johannesburg-Soweto, Durban, Port Elizabeth.
- ▶ **Economy:** Mining makes the country one of the richest in Africa; it is the first producer of manganese in the world and a major producer of platinum, chrome and gold. Its industry suffered, however, from an international boycott at the time of apartheid; foreign investment has since come back to the country but some sectors still lag behind. Barren land\* and a harsh climate\* make agriculture sometimes difficult; the country produces wheat, maize, and exports tobacco, sugar and cotton.

## HISTORY

- ▶ **1652-1700:** Dutch people settle at the Cape of Good Hope; the Dutch East India Company hopes to control the sea route between Europe and

Asia. They are quickly followed by Germans and French Huguenots fleeing\* persecution. Slavery is rapidly introduced.

- ▶ **1790-1800:** Slaves outnumber white colonists.
- ▶ **1795-1815:** Rivalry between the British who invaded the Cape and the Afrikaners soon grew. The British took control, more immigrants came.
- ▶ **1835:** Slavery was abolished by the British who had a more liberal attitude towards the Blacks.
- ▶ **1837-1850:** To get more land and get away from the British, the Afrikaners started the “Great Trek” to the North of the country where they clashed with Zulu tribes. The republics of Orange Free State and Transvaal were created.
- ▶ **1899-1902:** Rivalry culminated in the Boer War lost by the Boers. Agreement was eventually reached to recognize existing states and preserve white power.
- ▶ **1910:** Creation of the Union of South Africa.
- ▶ **1948:** Right-wing Afrikaners won the election and started implementing\* apartheid policies (racial segregation on the basis of separate development).
- ▶ **1961:** Proclamation of the Republic of South Africa and withdrawal\* from the Commonwealth (clashes over apartheid laws).
- ▶ **1980-89:** Weakening of apartheid (international sanctions, black struggles led by the African National Congress (ANC), economic problems, election of Mr de Klerk as President).
- ▶ **1989-91:** Release of Nelson Mandela (ANC leader, jailed for 25 years). Decision to dismantle apartheid.
- ▶ **1992:** Whites voted yes in the referendum on power-sharing.
- ▶ **1993:** End of economic sanctions (against apartheid).
- ▶ **1994:** Election of Nelson Mandela as President.

## GOVERNMENT

- ▶ **Presidential system:** The executive power is vested\* in the President, now Nelson Mandela, elected for five years. Two deputy presidents are designated to help him.
- ▶ **Legislative power:** There are two houses, the Parliament elected by direct suffrage and the Senate composed of representatives from the nine regions that now make up the Republic of South Africa. A new constitution is being drawn up\* so that citizens will be able to vote for parliament on an equal basis; it is to come into effect in 1999.
- ▶ **Main parties:** The ANC made world-famous by its former leader, Nelson Mandela; the National Party, Afrikaner-led but realistic about the necessary changes to make in South Africa; the Freedom Alliance (the Conservative Party and the Inkatha; the Zulu party whose supporters often clash with ANC people in townships\* in what is worrying black-on-black violence).

### Mots difficiles

*Barren land:* terres stériles

*harsh climate:* climat difficile

*fleeing (to flee):* fuyant

*implementing:* la mise en œuvre, en application de

*withdrawal:* retrait

*vested in:* est aux mains de/détenu par

*drawn up:* rédigée

*townships:* ghettos noirs/ quartiers noirs pauvres