
A-level History

7042/2Q The American Dream: reality and illusion, 1945–1980
Report on the Examination

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General

It was pleasing to find that, in the first year of examination of this new A-level specification, many students were very well prepared in terms of both factual knowledge and their ability to answer a longer paper than at AS level. There were many students who came to the examination able to write with confidence and enthusiasm about the post-war USA, although it was interesting that very few made reference to pre-war knowledge or post-1980 material; whether this was because they were well versed in the fact that such comments would not earn marks or because their knowledge of the period existed in something of a vacuum in the ‘American Century’ was not always clear. Strong knowledge of the civil rights movement was exhibited in response to the compulsory 01 question and also featured in question 04. There was engagement with significance in question 02, consideration of change and continuity in Eisenhower’s foreign policy in 03 also elicited some thoughtful and perceptive answers. In the responses to questions 02 and 03, there was also evidence that students had strong factual knowledge over the shorter timeframes and could think effectively, selecting relevant examples to support a case and providing substantiated individual judgement. There were, as ever, some students, whose knowledge of material or understanding of developments, were inadequate for the tasks set or whose desperation to show their knowledge came at the expense of more substantial analytical writing. Those who, despite effective factual revision, still under-performed may have failed to take on board some of the requirements of these questions and it is largely to help such students that the following comments are offered.

Section A

01

Students were required to evaluate three separate extracts in relation to an issue – Johnson’s Great Society. They were not asked to compare the given extracts and those that did this often wasted valuable time and included irrelevant information, although they were not penalised for so doing. The answer did not require an introduction, nor an overall conclusion, but some concluding judgement on each extract in relation to the question posed can be helpful to meet the criteria for the highest marks.

This is a new question type so it is understandable that not every student has a clear grasp on the approach to take although it was pleasing to see that very few students sought to overcomplicate the response by trying to combine the analysis. What was clear however was the varied number of approaches taken to the ideas of provenance and tone. The former was regularly dealt with by simply paraphrasing the provenance provided, the latter was rarely discussed at all. Successful answers were able to use their own knowledge to corroborate and challenge the sources and point to advantages of provenance and tone. The best of them looked at provenance in terms of author, medium, date and sought to contextualise the points being made. Here precise knowledge of the period as a whole was helpful, most notably in the opportunity to critique Banfield’s assertion that poverty would be eradicated by 1980 in the first Source. Though there was often some precise detail on the Great Society this usually revolved around an in depth knowledge of the civil rights legislation rather than other Great Society programmes, a situation which has been all too familiar from both AS papers taken so far.

Students also often made sweeping assertions in their assessment of provenance, with claims that by 1973 the Great Society programmes could legitimately be judged as they had been completed. There was often an excellent understanding of the role of the Vietnam War in undermining the Great Society but this was repeatedly expressed as a criticism of the sources in that they failed to mention the role of Vietnam and hence couldn’t be trusted. This point of omission was not given

credit as it could be used to criticise any source; rather it is the student's role to engage with what is chosen rather than what is not there. With some sources this can be more challenging than others and it was clear that most students saw the final Rustin source as the most useful and while there is a strong argument that this was the case it is notable that this source was comfortably the most accessible of the three.

Section B

02

Many students were knowledgeable about the civil rights movement as a whole but chose to go outside the timeframe of the question or confused the actions of the different groups. Events such as the Sit-ins were often cited and key figures such as King were often erroneously attributed key roles within the NAACP. A differentiating factor in many responses was the lack of understanding of the wider role of the NAACP, notably at Montgomery through Rosa Parks and at Little Rock. Good answers showed an appreciation both of the wider role of the NAACP and of the various other factors that contributed to the success of the movement. Many students assumed that the question was angled towards a comparison of organisation's roles but the timeframe clearly reduces the influence that could be ascribed to the SCLC, SNCC, Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. Instead more successful answers evaluated the roles of the Presidents and Supreme Court, whilst the most successful were able to draw on the role of the media or the Cold War climate as contributors.

Very few students sought to challenge a question that was designed to be provocative with virtually all accepting that the Civil Rights movement was a success in the period despite the fact that the campaigns continued well into the subsequent decade and no significant legislation emerged in the period 1947-57.

03

This question was highly attractive to students, with a number thinking that it was straightforward. However, the wealth of potential examples that students could draw on meant that selection skills were at a premium and also meant that students ran the risk of producing a list of events with minimal comparison. The other most obvious omission was the limited attention that students paid to the fact the question referred to 'elsewhere in the world' and did not seek a comparison between policy in Europe and Asia exclusively. Surprisingly few students were able to bring in events in the Middle East such as in Lebanon, Iran or in the Suez crisis, still fewer took the opportunity to reflect on Eisenhower's response to Castro seizing of power in Cuba or the role of the US in Guatemala. Those that did were able to find more evidence for their analysis from this wider scope.

The strongest answers were, therefore, distinguished by a genuine appreciation of the question and by a more nuanced approach than, 'it was exactly the same / it was completely different'. Those students who sought to analyse how the goals of Eisenhower's foreign policy could be argued to be identical but the methods employed differing depending on the theatre often found that this approach helped with their selection of evidence and brought the response together very effectively.

04

This comparison question was answered enthusiastically, possibly perhaps for the sense of sympathy both Presidents can engender.

This question proved accessible because of the obviously provocative use of the word 'disastrous' and the stipulation that consideration of 'home and abroad' should feature. As a result most

responses were well structured and dealt with both presidencies' foreign and domestic policy and weighed up their success. Here deep subject knowledge was vital therefore in order to have coherent comment on each of the four areas and many students struggled to identify key areas of Ford's domestic and foreign policy. Typically these students were those who had remembered the lighter details of both presidencies, the Air Force One stumble, Chevy Chase impression, swamp rabbit, Billygate and Johnson's comments on Ford. All these points could have been successful if part of a broader narrative on media perceptions but often they were the sole determinant of disaster for students in an individual area.

More successful responses managed to contextualise both Presidencies, by referring to inherited problems and the damage done to the presidency by Watergate. A thorough exploration of the issues at home was also one of the defining factors of the stronger responses and for this it was clear that many students had used a structure that looked at the economy and minority rights while also being aware of other events such as Three Mile Island.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.