
AS-LEVEL HISTORY

Component 7041/2Q
Report on the Examination

Specification 7041
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Component 7041/2Q

The American Dream: reality and illusion, 1945–1980

Component 2Q: Prosperity, inequality and Superpower status, 1945–1963

General Comments

There was a large entry for this new Component 2 option on the post-war USA, particularly given that it had no direct precursor. Most students had clearly engaged enthusiastically with the course and acquired some meaningful and often highly detailed knowledge that they were able to deploy in response to the questions set. Many showed the benefit of having studied the origins of the Cold War at GCSE and some were able to move beyond GCSE style responses to a deeper understanding of the issues they had studied. Some students also showed a clear understanding of the over-arching themes of the Component and, in particular the idea of the ‘American Dream’ and to what extent it was a reality in all areas and for all citizens. At best, students wrote with confidence and interest in the debates thrown up by the sources and essay questions. Of course, there were some who muddled events, issues and terminology, or whose knowledge let them down. Nevertheless, there were very few who failed to complete the paper or proved unable to write anything of relevance.

Overall students coped well with the new format of the examination. There was evidence that students had taken time to plan and structure their answers, although not as much as I would have hoped for given the additional time they could devote to the two questions. There was some careful reading of the sources in Question 01 but not all students had got to grips with the multiple demands posed by this new format question and it is hoped that the comments which follow will provide some helpful guidance for future examinees. Most, however, adopted a focused and balanced approach when writing their Section B essay and the very best showed judgement and upheld an argument, linking well to the question throughout.

Section A

Question 1

The majority of students considered the two sources in turn, making some comparative comment in the body of their answer and developing the comparison further in their conclusion. (Those who adopted a more comparative approach throughout sometimes found it harder to address all the elements of the question, although they were equally rewarded when they did so.)

Examiners were looking for three key elements in the answers:

i) An assessment of the provenance and tone of each source

The best students here identified both provenance and tone for each source and used these to evaluate the sources in line with the question. It was notable however how few students engaged with the idea of tone despite the sources having very different styles. Terminology for assessing tone was also limited in many responses and students were often too willing to take comments in the sources on face value, for instance in Source A many students failed to see the sarcasm in Harrington’s comments that the poor were being looked after. It was

pleasing that some students could identify Harrington explicitly as an adviser to Kennedy and an influential author, others, however took him to be a card carrying Democrat despite the provenance. In a similar way there were generalised assertions about Handlin having no experience of poverty because he taught at Harvard.

(ii) An understanding of the historical context

This was, perhaps, the weakest section with many students being drawn into a discussion of poverty without making any reference to affluence or being trapped in a discussion of the cities without considering the US as a whole. More worryingly it seemed that many students were keen to address the question purely through the medium of the civil rights movement. Hence discussions of affluence were connected to sit-ins or Birmingham in 1963 in the most tenuous ways and neglecting all other ethnic groups and areas. In terms of context it is important to see the course as one about American society as a whole rather than an extension of the former HIS2P. Context was also problematic when students extrapolated from the sources in an overly specific way for example suggesting that ‘the images of brutality shown in newspapers and on TV’ from Source B referred to Little Rock or to Birmingham when clearly it was a generalised comment about increased coverage from Handlin. Nevertheless there was good own contextual knowledge provided by many students including figures on the extent of poverty, the growth of the suburbs with Levittown featuring prominently and the various housing acts. The best answers were able to contextualise both the sources and the wider issue of affluence.

(iii) Comparison between the two Sources

The comparative element of the question was often the weakest. Some students thought it sufficient to assert that one source was ‘more valuable’ than the other and a number justified their choice purely on issues of provenance rather than examining what the sources were valuable for. The better responses were more aware of the need to balance provenance, tone and context and drew on their analyses of each source to provide a meaningful and substantiated judgement.

Section B

Question 02

On the whole this question was well-answered with many students clearly having a good recall of the material from their GCSE studies. For some this led to a GCSE style response listing the events and then saying which were driven by a desire to preserve peace and which were belligerent. This type of response was credited but lacked the sophistication required for a Level 4 mark. The better responses were able to look at Truman’s actions in the round and produced analysis that reflected the different interpretations associated with the leading historical schools of thought on the origins of the Cold War. For example a weaker response would suggest that dropping the Atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a violent action not driven by a desire for peace, a more sophisticated would recognise how the loss of life caused by the A-bombs must be weighed against the projected losses expected from a land invasion. The most sophisticated responses were able to consider larger scale drivers for Truman’s foreign policy such as the need to maintain trading partners.

Question 03

This question was both the least popular and the least well done and this was surprising given that McCarthyism features twice on the specification, is the topic of a source question on the specimen question papers and has a specimen answer. The question required some thought in the planning but could have been answered very ably by a student who had considered the key events in domestic policy and weighed these up in turn to see whether fear of communism played a role in each. Most alarming was the weakness of student's knowledge of legislation directly connected to McCarthy's campaigns such as the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950 and the Communist Control Act of 1954 both of which were conspicuous by their absence from all but a handful of responses. Surprisingly the arguments against the idea that McCarthyism had an influence failed to consider the civil rights movement despite the enthusiasm many students showed for it in 01. It could have easily been argued that civil rights legislation, the increase in the minimum wage and the extension of social security were actions that were left leaning and were passed despite the atmosphere created by McCarthy.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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