
A-LEVEL HISTORY

7042/2Q The American Dream Reality or Illusion
Report on the Examination June 2018

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General

The second year of this A-Level showed some progress from the first but highlighted the challenge of covering two years of material in depth. This exam differentiated well with a very wide range of marks from the E to A boundary. What became clear was the progress many students had made in addressing the sources questions in terms of developing a structure for dealing with provenance, tone, contextual knowledge and values and limitations but also how this needs to develop further for limitations not to be based on what the source omits. For the essay questions it was clear that the most successful students were capable of bringing in material from a number of bullet points on the specification and had clearly thought carefully about their answers and spent time planning. There was also, amongst the better answers, a very precise understanding of the focus of the question. Examiners expressed concern about students seeming to spend more time on question 01 at the expense of the other two questions despite it only being worth five more marks and in some cases led students to be more vague in their analysis. It was not uncommon to see 5-6 page answers for question 01 followed by two three page answers for the essay questions leading in some cases to broad questions not being fully explored.

Question 01

This question was designed to explore the specification topic of the 'concept of anti-communism' and the specific bullet point 'The USA as a Superpower: Truman's character and policies; post-war peace making; the Cold War and 'containment' in Europe and Asia; the response to the rise of Communism in Asia'. Successful students were also able to bring in aspects of other bullet points in the first part of the specification including 'legacies of the world war' and 'the rise of McCarthyism'. The sources question showed some improvements from last year's paper with students increasingly having seen the need to comment on provenance and provided supporting contextual knowledge. There was still an ongoing trend of many students looking at the sources in a binary way, 'it is useful because / it is not useful because' and this led to some unusual critiques of the sources such as suggesting that Source A was not useful because Shtykov did not provide information on US plans. More successful students were able to use contextual knowledge to identify flaws without being forced to criticise what is not in the sources. For example students were able to identify that Mao was confident of no US intervention because there had been none when he had taken power, or in Source B that the abstention was from the USSR which suggested US dominance of the UN proceedings. Sources A and C were designed to provide a clear utility in that Source C is convinced that the invasion of Korea is part of a plan for global domination where Source A makes it clear that the invasion was driven by Kim Il Sung and was part of a plan to unify Korea. The other main problem was students not focusing on the beginning of the war as the question requested. In so doing answers drifted into criticisms that the sources told us nothing about how Eisenhower ended the war or the stalemate that ensued. The best answers drew on provenance well, for example stressing that Shtykov was unlikely to exaggerate in a private report to Stalin or stressing that MacArthur's rhetoric was rampantly belligerent, especially for a private meeting and were able to draw out limitations through the provenance, tone and contextual knowledge (for example highlighting that the South Korean elections were far from 'a valid expression of the free will of the electorate'). The new style of sources question remains a challenge for students but does differentiate to good effect.

Question 02

This was the most popular question and offered students a broad range of topics to write on. Responses could include material from all four bullet points in the section of the specification ‘John F Kennedy and the ‘New Frontier’, 1960–1963’ however the most successful students had a clear understanding of the bullet point, ‘The presidential election of 1960 and reasons for Kennedy’s victory; the policies and personalities of the Kennedy administration; the ideas behind the ‘New Frontier’’. Top performing students were able to offer specific details of explicit election promises such as closing the missile gap and to end racial discrimination in federally aided housing at the stroke of a pen as well as implicit promises such as those made to African-americans by Kennedy’s actions in relation to King. Other students took as their model the New Frontier speech and structured their argument accordingly looking at ‘science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus’. It was surprising how many students struggled with specific details on the New Frontier given that it is very clearly the prime focus of the JFK part of the specification. Foreign policy was well done in relation to Cuba but the best students were able to provide more balance with reflections on Berlin and Vietnam. Civil Rights issues tended to praise Kennedy for trying but were less balanced than other areas of the spec. Students were able to show good conceptual knowledge through reference to Kennedy’s narrow election win, the problem of keeping the dixiecrats onside and the desire for a second term. The question highlighted the need to understand the specification terminology well and have a broad range of specific and well selected detail to draw on, the difference between the number of students who could talk in detail about the space race (many) and those who could talk in detail about the education policies of the New Frontier (far fewer) was illuminating.

Question 03

This was the second most popular of the essay questions but it was clear that some students were forced into taking on this question by their lack of preparation for the civil rights question despite not understanding what ‘conservative social policies’ really were. This did not prevent well written and argued questions getting into the bottom of Level 4 but did once again highlight the need for a clear understanding of the terminology of the specification. Spec bullet points covered by this question included most obviously ‘The Presidential election of 1968 and the reasons for Nixon’s victory: divisions within the Democratic Party’ and ‘The restoration of conservative social policies; the reaction to protest movements and forces of social change; economic change and the end of the post-war boom’ but also ‘The limits of American world power’. Some very sophisticated answers could also bring in reference to the 1960 election and Nixon’s time as Vice President both of which were valid areas to explore the idea of Nixon’s popularity. There was a wide range of material to consider on Nixon’s conservative social policies including the clamp down on protests and crime, the war on drugs and attempts to reduce the Welfare Bill. Conceptual understanding could also be shown by highlighting policies that were far from conservative such as those relating to women’s rights and the environment. As with the question on Kennedy the huge range of possible material led some students to ignore powerful arguments such as when the successes of détente were omitted in favour of a lengthy discussion on Vietnam. More sophisticated answers were able to highlight the failings/misfortunes of the Democrats both in 1968 with relation to LBJ’s legacy, the death of Bobby Kennedy and the impact of George Wallace’s campaign. This was also a question that allowed students to take issue with the assertion of Nixon’s popularity with some claiming that Nixon was not, in fact, popular and that a combination of Democrat failings and an affection for the Eisenhower period helped him considerably. Watergate was also brought in by some students who were able to argue that Nixon’s popularity was not consistent but rose and fell, ultimately to the lowest depths.

Question 04

The least popular of the three essay questions and the lowest performing one by some distance. This was, perhaps, inevitable given that the civil rights movement has petered out by this stage. However the question was very clearly rooted in the specification bullet point on 'The USA after Nixon: 1974-80'. This makes clear that students should be studying 'African-Americans in North and South: the impact of civil rights legislation; change and continuity in the 'New South' in the period from 1974-80. It was expected this would be more popular given that it should have been the most recent area the students have studied as well as being covered by any summary work on the civil rights movement as a whole. Again the most successful students were those who could be flexible with their use of information. An understanding of the political rights achieved by 1965 was a good start, particularly if some precise detail was provided on African-American representation in politics over the next decade. Likewise the decline of the civil rights groups was rightly mentioned as a consequence of the achievement of political equality and the lack of a coherent plan for addressing economic problems. The most successful students were able to draw on other bullet points from the final two parts of the specification. These included bullets on 'responses to social divisions' and 'the extent of social and economic change' and 'The restoration of conservative social policies; the reaction to protest movements and forces of social change; economic change and the end of the post-war boom.' Economic pressures were highlighted in a variety of ways including the ghettoization of the inner cities, the overall decline in the US economy and the influence of the oil crises alongside the growth in the African-American prison population as a consequence of the war on drugs. Stronger students could also balance their assessment with comment on the growth of an African-American middle class and perhaps provide detail of the increased profile of African-American in sports and entertainment.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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