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**Level: Third Year**

**Module: Etude de Textes de Civilisation**

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**Lecture three : Early Years, Westward Expansion, and**

**Regional Differences**

George Washington was sworn in as the fi rst president

of the United States on April 30, 1789. He had been

in charge of organizing an effective military force

during the Revolution. Now he was in charge of building a

functioning government.

He worked with Congress to create departments of State,

Treasury, Justice, and War. The heads of those departments

would serve as presidential advisors, his cabinet. A Supreme

Court composed of one chief justice and fi ve associate justices

was established, together with three circuit courts and 13 district

courts. Policies were developed for administering the western

territories and bringing them into the Union as new states.

Washington served two four-year terms and then left office,

setting a precedent that eventually became law. The next two

presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, represented two

schools of thought on the role of government. This divergence

led to the formation of the first political parties in the Western

world. The Federalists, led by Adams and Alexander Hamilton,

Washington’s secretary of the Treasury, generally represented

trade and manufacturing interests. They feared anarchy and

believed in a strong central government that could set national

economic policies and maintain order. They had the most

support in the North. Republicans, led by Jefferson, generally

represented agricultural interests. They opposed a strong

central government and believed in states’ rights and the self suffi

ciency of farmers. They had the most support in the South.

For about 20 years, the young nation was able to thrive

in relative peace. Its policy was to be friendly and impartial to

all other nations. However, it was not immune from political

developments in Europe, particularly in Britain and France,

which were at war. The British navy seized American ships headed

to France, and the French navy seized American ships headed

to Britain. Various diplomatic negotiations averted hostilities

during the 1790s and early 1800s, but it seemed only a matter of

time before the United States would have to defend its interests.

War with Britain came in 1812. Fighting took place mostly

in the Northeastern states and along the east coast. One British

expeditionary force reached the new capital of Washington, in

the District of Columbia. It set fi re to the executive mansion —

causing President James Madison to fl ee — and left the city in

fl ames. But the U.S. army and navy won enough decisive battles

to claim victory. After two and a half years of fi ghting, and

with a treasury depleted by a separate war with France, Britain

signed a peace treaty with the United States. The U.S. victory

ended once and for all any British hopes of reestablishing

influence south of the Canadian border.

By the time the War of 1812 ended, many of the serious

difficulties faced by the new American republic had disappeared.

National union under the Constitution brought

a balance between liberty and order. A low national debt and

a continent awaiting exploration presented the prospect of

peace, prosperity, and social progress. The most signifi cant

event in foreign policy was a pronouncement by President

James Monroe expressing U.S. solidarity with the newly

independent nations of Central and South America. The

Monroe Doctrine warned against any further attempts by

Europe to colonize Latin America. Many of the new nations, in

turn, expressed their political affi nity with the United States by

basing their constitutions on the North American model.

The United States doubled in size with the purchase of the

Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 and Florida from Spain

in 1819. From 1816 to 1821, six new states were created. Between

1812 and 1852, the population tripled. The young nation’s size and

diversity defi ed easy generalization. It also invited contradiction.

The United States was a country of both civilized cities

built on commerce and industry, and primitive frontiers where

the rule of law was often ignored. It was a society that loved

freedom but permitted slavery. The Constitution held all these

different parts together. The strains, however, were growing.

Sectional Conflict

The United States in 1850 was a huge nation stretched

between two oceans. Wide differences in geography,

natural resources, and development were obvious from

region to region.

New England and the Middle Atlantic states were the main

centers of finance, commerce, and manufacturing. Principal

products included textiles and clothing, lumber, and machinery.

Maritime trade flourished. The Southern states were chiefl y

agricultural, producing tobacco, sugar, and cotton with slave labor.

The Middle Western states were agricultural, too, but their grain

and meat products came from the hands of free men and women.

In 1819, Missouri had applied for statehood. Northerners

objected because there were 10,000 slaves there. Congressman

Henry Clay of Kentucky proposed a compromise: Missouri

would enter the Union and continue to permit slavery, while

Maine would enter as a free state.

Regional positions on the issue hardened in the decades

following the Missouri Compromise. In the North, the

movement to abolish slavery was vocal and grew increasingly

powerful. In the South, the belief in white supremacy and in

maintaining the economic status quo was equally vocal and

powerful. Although thousands of slaves escaped north through

a network of secret routes known as the Underground Railroad,

slaves still comprised a third of the population in the slave states

at the time of the 1860 census.

Most Northerners were unwilling to challenge the existence

of slavery in the South, yet many opposed its expansion into

the western territories. Southerners felt just as strongly that

the territories themselves had the right to decide their status.

A young politician from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, felt that the

issue was a national, not local one. “A house divided against itself

cannot stand,” he said. “I believe this government cannot endure

permanently half-slave and half-free. I do not expect the Union

to be dissolved … but I do expect it will cease to be divided.”

In 1860, the Republican Party nominated Lincoln as its

candidate for president on an anti-slavery platform. In a fourman

race, he won only 39 percent of the popular vote but a

clear majority of votes in the Electoral College. The Electoral

College is the group of citizens who directly elect the U.S.

president, following the popular vote.

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The storm that had been gathering for decades was about

to explode with brutal force. Southern states had threatened

to leave the Union if Lincoln were elected; the secessions

started even before he was sworn in. It would be up to the new

president to try to hold the Union together.

**Source:** USA History in Brief. Learner English Series. Bureau of International Information Programs. Global Publishing, 2010.