

## Anglo-American Cultural Studies

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1. Aufl. 2009. Taschenbuch. 336 S. Paperback

ISBN 978 3 8252 3125 5

Format (B x L): 15 x 21,5 cm

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# Anglo- American Cultural Studies

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A. Francke Verlag · Tübingen und Basel  
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Eugen Ulmer Verlag · Stuttgart  
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vdf Hochschulverlag AG an der ETH Zürich

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A. Francke Verlag Tübingen und Basel

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Abbildungen Umschlaginnenseite: United Kingdom Map: Teleatlas/EU © European Communities, 1995–2009; US Map: National Atlas of the United States.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

© 2009 · Narr Francke Attempto Verlag GmbH + Co. KG  
Dischingerweg 5 · D-72070 Tübingen  
ISBN 978-3-7720-8283-2

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Gedruckt auf chlorfrei gebleichtem und säurefreiem Werkdruckpapier.

Internet: <http://www.francke.de>  
E-Mail: [info@francke.de](mailto:info@francke.de)

Einbandgestaltung: Atelier Reichert, Stuttgart  
Satz: Informationsdesign D. Fratzke, Kirchentellinsfurt  
Druck und Bindung: CPI – Ebner & Spiegel, Ulm  
Printed in Germany

ISBN 978–3–8252–3125–5 (UTB-Bestellnummer)

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Very special thanks go to three very special readers of the drafts of this book. **Susanne Fischer** combined encouragement and close reading to become more than just the perfect copy editor. **Beate Körner** inspired me with her astute critical eye and her voracious curiosity. **Edward Martin** generously provided expert advice based on his innate love for language and his meticulous attention to detail.

This book is dedicated to my amazing students of the past and the present...

*... für Robo – ohne Dich hätte ich es nie geschafft.*

# Introduction

Let's begin this introduction with a few words about the title of our book. I use *Anglo-American* as an adjective to refer to both the United Kingdom and the United States. Why cover both the UK and the US? Especially since you can often just skim the surface in a book of this size? It's always a question of what's better: being able to cover a lot more by skimming the surface like a surfer or diving into the waves like a deep sea diver but at the cost of not seeing enough of the whole. I hope you'll find it satisfying to see more of the surface and then use this UTB Basics book as a springboard to take your deep sea dives in places that you hadn't thought of before.

both US and UK?

Through comparison I think we can gain more interesting insights than just by covering one country. Covering American Studies alone would leave out the interesting comparisons with Britain, which is closer to Germany and part of the European Union. Covering British Studies alone would leave out America, which, for better or worse, is a force to be reckoned with. American culture in the broadest possible sense can be seen as a symbol of freedom, as a monstrous threat, or as a glorious promise, but you would probably need less energy to try to understand America than to try to ignore it. And there are unfortunately no introductory books currently in print on American issues written in English especially for German university students.

I've written this book for different audiences. If you're pursuing a degree in English and are taking courses where information about the United Kingdom and the United States is either taught or is presupposed, you can read any of the chapters in Part I for an overview, which you'll hopefully find entertaining and will help you prepare for examinations on topics about American and British life.

intended audiences

I'm also writing for interested people with a German background who want to understand aspects of American and British



life that they find puzzling. I assume that you're not interested in reading a tourist guide that only emphasizes positive things about both countries. While I hope that my enthusiasm is contagious, I'll also try to encourage you to develop a critical perspective with the goal of a deeper understanding of things American and things British.

cultural studies

And what about the *Cultural Studies* part of the title? The subject called "cultural studies" has become very popular in publishing, teaching, and in research at universities in Britain and in the US since the 1960s and now too in other parts of the world. In Part II we'll be looking at some of the same information covered in Part I from a different perspective, giving you the chance not only to review the "facts" but also to see how newer ways of looking at culture have changed our attitude towards these "facts." In Part II we'll be seeing how key words like "identity" and "power" and "gender" can lend a new light to things British and American. I hope that students doing degrees in English or sociology at German universities will find Part II of our book useful as a springboard to dive into the depths of cultural studies.

America?

A few words about terminology. You'll notice that I often refer to the United States either informally as the *US* (without the periods) or as *America*. When I use the term *America* to refer to the United States, I'm of course aware that the United States makes up only about a third of the area of the continent of North America. Even noting that almost 75% of the population of the entire continent lives in the United States wouldn't justify ignoring Canada and Mexico. Perhaps another English noun will gradually come to be used as a substitute for *America* in the meaning of *the United States*. Or perhaps if Spanish continues to gain in importance, a new term will come into existence that will clearly indicate the US without perhaps offending Latin Americans.

Britain?

The terminology connected with Britain is so complicated that it deserves its own chapter as you'll see in just a few pages. But for now I'll just say that I use *Britain* to refer to the *United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*.

me

You'll perhaps be surprised about the style of writing, which, while perhaps startlingly informal in comparison to academic books in Germany, is actually not so uncommon at all in the Anglo-American academic world. Perhaps you're used to reading academic books in German in which the author is invisible


and the reader is not addressed. Academic writing in the US and in Britain often involves the first person. The author chooses the material he or she thinks is relevant and important. This choice is always partly subjective. Not using “I” wouldn’t make the choice any more objective. And since subjectivity and identity play a very important role in cultural studies, I’ve taken the liberty of making my identity more explicit than you may have expected for reasons that I hope to make clearer in the second part of the book.

You’ll have also noticed that I address you the reader in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person. By addressing you directly I hope to encourage a dialogue that on the pages of this book must remain one-sided but can become a true dialogue on the companion website at [utb-mehr-wissen.de](http://utb-mehr-wissen.de). And you’ll have noticed that I’ve also used contractions throughout in order to set an informal tone. Those who are aware of some of the differences between American and British English will also notice that I’ve almost always chosen the American equivalent. You’ll no doubt notice some other differences between this book and other academic books intended for a German audience. You might find it useful to make a note of the differences – I’ll be mentioning some of them in Part II.

You may ask yourself about which sources I’ve used for the information in the chapters. First of all: Almost nothing in this book is original except the way it’s written and my combination of *Landeskunde* facts in Part I with cultural studies approaches in Part II in one volume. And even the way it’s written isn’t original in the Anglo-American academic world. Since the books in UTB Basics are intended as an introduction for students, almost all of what you read in this book is based on commonly accepted facts and insights. You can find more detailed information about sources on the companion website, which I’ll be updating far more frequently than is possible for this book. I assume that neither digital immigrants like myself nor digital natives like some of you still rely on printed bibliographies alone to provide you with up-to-date tips on what to read. But I have included recommendations of books that I find useful for further in-depth reading so that you can start your deep sea diving without having to log on to the companion website.

Although you can find an index at the end, this book isn’t meant to be a substitute for a cultural dictionary or an online en-

cyclopedia, which you would turn to for quick factual answers. My goal isn't to provide you with an overload of quick facts but to present fairly common basic knowledge about a wide range of specific topics about life in Britain and America in addition to an introduction to the exciting world of cultural studies.

it rings a bell 

You can find many cross references marked with a bell they are supposed “to ring a bell” for you. If this were an online book, you could click on the bell and be whisked away to another page. But while you don't have to read this book chapter by chapter, I'd hope that you find the book interesting enough to read chapter-wise and ideally from start to finish since I've incorporated a narrative with elements of surprise and a few intentional traps that work best if you follow a first-chapter-first order. You'll note that many – but not all – of the chapters follow the same pattern. The first three chapters are appetizers. The many individual items about American and British geography, history, and special issues are all fairly small as good hors d'œuvres are supposed to be. I hope you're hungry enough to proceed to chapters 4 through 11, which mostly deal with classic *Landeskunde* topics. After we've digested these topics, we'll then be ready for an after-dinner discussion of cultural studies in Part II.

goals for you and me


If you find this book to be interesting and thought-provoking enough to continue your own exploration of things American and British, then I will have achieved my goal. If you also discover new subversive ways of approaching Anglo-American cultural studies, then you'll make me blissful. “Subversive?” you may ask in surprise. But let's take things one step at a time and begin by using the song “Starting Here, Starting Now,” which my favorite singer, actor, and director Barbra Streisand sang on her tour of Europe in 2007 (music by Daniel Shire, lyrics by Richard Maltby Jr):


**Now take my hand  
For the greatest journey  
Heaven can allow  
Starting love  
Starting here  
Starting now**

# Part I: Specific Topics in Anglo-American Area Studies

## Contents

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# 1 | The Where (geography)

Let's cover geography and history in the form of easily digestible appetizers. You may be familiar with some of what you'll taste, other things may be somewhat new for you. We'll be using the insights and facts gained from our survey of geography and history in the chapters to come. When you see a bell 🔔, imagine that your host is ringing a bell signaling a main course (in a different chapter). You can then either go right to the main course or you can simply ignore the bell and continue with the hors d'œuvres. Bon appétit!

Our first very short question and answer: Where should we begin? On an island or on a continent? Let's take the bigger one, the continent, first.

## Does the term “continental US” make sense?

The first question is very easy to answer: No, the term “continental US” doesn't make any sense. Since we decided to start with a continent, you may be somewhat surprised by a question that seems to imply that the United States is a continent. While the US is very big, the continent of North America is even bigger and includes the second largest country in area in the world, Canada, and according to some geographers all of Central America, meaning from Mexico to Panama too, and even Greenland.

If “continental US” doesn't refer to an entire continent, then it would make sense to understand the term as referring to all states of the United States on the continent of North America, thus including the lower 48 below Canada as well as Alaska, the largest state in area and separated by Canada from the lower 48 but still squarely on the North American continent. But unfortunately the commonly used term “continental US” almost always refers just to the lower 48 as if Alaska wasn't even part of the continent. Even though the term doesn't seem to make any sense, it at least could remind us of the fact that Alaska (number 49) and Hawaii (number 50) are the two “newest” states of the Union, each barely fifty years old. And the use of the term lower 48 could remind us of the special status of Washington DC, which isn't a state at all even though – or because – it's the capital of the entire country, a country that while absorbing mil-

lower 48

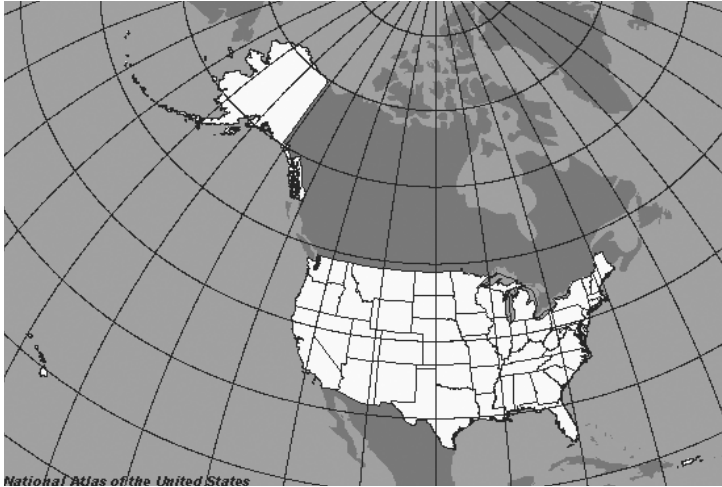


Fig. 1.1

Continental US?

lions of immigrants presented challenging physical barriers for the trip from east to west.

### How have physical barriers affected the settlement of the US?

An easy answer would be “a lot” since physical barriers have both restricted and defined settlement from the very beginning. We’re supposed to be answering geography questions here, you might object, not history, so let’s keep the answer short and just list the barriers from east to west starting with the Atlantic Ocean, the Appalachian Mountains from New England to the south, the Great Lakes if you stay north after crossing the Appalachians, then the Great Plains – which you wouldn’t need climbing skills to cross but which require a great deal of perseverance: the Great Plains are thousands of kilometers of nothing but very plain Plains. But to get across the Plains you would have to swim across the Mississippi and its tributaries first (and during flooding, the Mississippi can be several kilometers wide). Only after surviving the great sameness of the Great Plains would you be faced with the sheer faces of the Rocky Mountains, which are rocky indeed with more than 60 peaks easily dwarfing Germany’s Zugspitze. But even after crossing the Rockies, settlers then have a few deserts to traverse, including one of the hottest places on the planet, Death Valley. Travelers now would have to resist the temptations

oceans, mountains,  
plains, rivers, deserts

of recreation at one of the largest man-made lakes in the world, Lake Mead, and the temptations of gambling in one of the largest man-made cities in one of the least habitable places on Earth, Las Vegas, before finally arriving in the Promised Land of California. But the American drive towards the West wouldn't stop at the coast but continue into the Pacific to one of the most isolated islands in the world, Hawaii, and even further to one of the United States' few territories, the island of Guam, the most extreme western point of the United States, which is so far west that it's almost in the Far East, being only a couple of thousand miles (or a few more thousand kilometers: 1.6 kilometer = 1 mile) from Japan, where it's already tomorrow since Guam is on the other side of the International Date Line. We've now moved from the East coast all the way across the country and much of the Pacific Ocean and thus duplicated partly the original movement west, a movement that has been thought of in some periods of American history as a sign of divine will (👉 6).

### How does the size of the US compare to European countries?

The answer can be simple and easy: the US is a lot lot bigger than any European country taken individually. The US is roughly sixteen times larger than France, the largest country in the European Union. On the other hand, the US is only about five times larger than Greenland, which although politically connected to Denmark isn't part of the EU. But the US is twenty-seven times bigger than Germany and almost forty times bigger than the United Kingdom. But at least Germany is bigger than almost any of the states of the United States taken individually. Only the states of Alaska, Texas, California, and Montana are each bigger than Germany.

how big exactly?

Well, you may ask, just how big is the US? Would you prefer the US Census Bureau's figure of 3,537,438,44 square miles or the CIA World Fact Book's figure of 9,826,630 square kilometers or the United Nations' figure of 9,629,091 square kilometers? If you have a hard time imagining what these numbers mean, then what about comparing how long it would take you to drive from the East coast, say from New York, the largest city in the US, all the way across the country to the second largest city, Los Angeles, on the West coast? Well, if you drove according to the old nation-

al speed limit of 55 miles per hour (which converts to a wonderfully leisurely 88 kilometers per hour), it would take more than 44 hours non-stop driving – from the Big Apple to the City of Angels, comparable to driving from the Cologne Cathedral southwest all the way through France and Spain right down to where Europe ends at Gibraltar and then back again including a final one-way trip to Frankfurt Airport. But what would you see in the US on the 44-hour marathon from the east to the west?

### **What are some interesting and unusual physical features of the US?**

Do you like outdoor recreation? What about the wide open spaces? Wet or dry, cold or hot? Some of the same barriers we just heard about that made the settlement of the continent so difficult are now some of the top tourist attractions in the country. Interesting features might include the Great Lakes if you enjoy water recreation; the Rocky Mountains if you enjoy climbing, hiking, and skiing; Death Valley if you enjoy being at one of the lowest points on Earth (the part of Death Valley called Badwater is actually the lowest point in North America). Unusual physical features would certainly include the Grand Canyon in Arizona formed by the Colorado River over millions of years, one of the natural wonders of the world. The Grand Canyon National Park is one of the oldest in the US and extends from one man-made lake, Lake Powell, formed by the controversial Glen Canyon Dam in the mid 1960s, to Lake Mead, one of the largest man-made lakes in the world formed by one of the largest dams in the world, the Hoover Dam, which when built in the mid 1930s was the largest concrete structure in the world. Of course there are also natural lakes; some of the largest in the world make up the Great Lakes, which partly form the border between Canada and the US and which have the illustrative names Lake Superior (the biggest as the name implies), Lake Huron (named after the Huron Indians), Lake Michigan (which forms part of the border of the state of ... Michigan of course and is the only one of the five completely within the US), Lake Erie (named after the Erie Indians), and Lake Ontario, the smallest and most easterly, which has the same name as the Canadian province on its northern banks. All five lakes taken together make up an area larger than the UK. What

mountains, valleys,  
canyons, lakes



“lies” or better “falls” between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario? The most famous waterfall in the US: Niagara Falls (the word stress in *Niagara* is on the second syllable unless you’re speaking German).

rivers

Although the Grand Canyon wouldn’t exist without the Colorado River, the Colorado isn’t even half as long as the Mississippi. (Remember to pronounce the “a” in *Colorado* like an “ah”; Germans commonly mispronounce the name. And if you can’t remember how many s’s and p’s are in *Mississippi*, then just call it Ol’ Man River, its name in a famous song from the musical *Show Boat*.) The Mississippi River’s origin lies in the far north of Minnesota fairly close to the Canadian border, and when joined on the west by the Missouri and on the east by the Ohio, it drains most of the vast Great Plains in the center of the country before expanding into a delta area in New Orleans and flowing into the Gulf of Mexico.

sameness

Americans not only crossed the enormous Great Plains on their movement westwards, they also managed to turn these vast open areas into fertile grazing and farming land and to exploit the mineral resources – in spite of extreme temperatures and lack of rain, which in the worst of times can lead to conditions found in the Dust Bowl, a part of the southern Great Plains where extensive farming led to extreme soil erosion. Perhaps the most interesting and unusual physical feature of the US compared with Western Europe is the sameness of the landscape, clearly evidenced in the Great Plains: you can drive for hours and hours through Texas and not see anything else than fields so flat that on a clear day and with good eyesight you can almost persuade yourself that you can experience the curvature of the earth by staring into the distance (and since much of Texas is “dry”, meaning you can’t legally purchase alcohol, you’ll probably even be sober).

And if this book were only about interesting and unusual features, then we could continue westwards and describe in detail the Rocky Mountains, Death Valley, Mount Saint Helens, the Hawaiian Islands ..., but let’s leave that to the tourist brochures and films and turn our sights to some of those aspects not usually on the ordinary tourist’s route.

## What effects has civilization had upon America's physical features?

A lot of environmentalists might be tempted to respond immediately with “certainly not any good effects”, but dam builders might respond with “fantastic examples of feats of human engineering” providing millions of Americans with electricity and water and recreation and gambling opportunities. You can probably find one example of environmental damage for each and every triumph of man over nature, and we'll be looking at a few examples in more detail later (🔔 9).

## How do the latitudes of major American cities compare with European cities?

Comparing the size of the US with European countries probably wasn't very surprising since almost everyone knows the US is a really big country, so why not try and fool your friends with this question: If you were to draw a very straight line from Mainz (which conveniently lies directly on the 50-degree line of latitude) due west, which American city would be the first one you'd hit? Answer: Regina (which curiously enough has almost the same population as Mainz) but only if you interpret the word “American” to mean “North American” and thus include the Canadian province of Saskatchewan with its capital city of Regina. Mainz and of course all other parts of Germany north of Mainz are further north than the entire continental US. Pick an American city, say New York or Washington, DC or Miami. What are the corresponding European cities? New York is on the same line of latitude as Madrid, Washington DC's equivalent is Athens, and Miami's equivalent would either be slightly south of the Canary Islands in the West Sahara desert or if you insist on a “twin city of latitude” for Miami, then you'd have to choose Dubai.

further south than you think

If most of Germany lies farther north than the entire lower 48 states of the United States, then why is it not only much hotter but also much colder in the US than in most of Germany? A very good question!

### **How could you briefly describe the climate of the US?**

In a word: varied. In two words: extraordinarily varied. In a long sentence: Because the two main mountain ranges of the US, the Appalachians in the east and the Rockies in the west, run north to south, cold Arctic air from the north has no natural barrier and can flow into the very heart of the country, making places in the Great Plains much colder in winter than other places on earth with the same latitude. The southeastern region can also be hot and humid, with Florida's peninsula extending a bit into the subtropics, with milder winters than the northeast region, which can experience heavy snowfall even close to the coast. Parts of the west coast are the only areas comfortably habitable without energy needed for central heating and air-conditioning.

### **And how have Americans learned to live with climatic extremes?**

wonders of technology?

The answer in two words: amazingly well. The explanation for how and why Americans have managed to live with climatic extremes is a bit more complicated. Perhaps part of the American character involves the kind of resilience that can be seen in all the building and rebuilding of homes or buying new mobile homes until the next tornado blows them away: this ability to continually start afresh and start anew seems very American. Technological advances like central heating and air conditioning, the use of snow plows, the development of weather forecasting with special networks devoted to nothing else than descriptions of the next storm have enabled millions of Americans to spread across a continent which in amazingly large parts isn't fit for comfortable human habitation. Of course you could also wonder why electrical wires aren't run underground so that hurricanes, tornadoes, and ice storms wouldn't interrupt electricity as often. Maybe politicians are to blame? Speaking of politics...

### **How is the United States divided for political purposes?**

states and districts

If you quickly peek at the map we'll be using to show population change a little later (figure 1.3), you can instantly see one way in which the US is divided for political purposes, namely into 50 states. Each state is made up of congressional districts, each of which elects its own member to the House of Representatives.

There are a total of 435 districts and with a total US population of roughly 300,000,000 each district should represent roughly 700,000 people. Since people tend to move a lot within the country, some areas lose population and others gain. Every ten years a national census takes place partly to see which districts need to be redrawn so that all districts more or less represent the same population. What sounds complicated sometimes turns out to be extremely complicated, especially when some politicians try to redraw districts so that their party can gain a majority (🔊 5). What's much easier is the division for the Senate: each state has two Senators regardless of area or of population and regardless of what the state actually looks like on the map!

And what do you notice about the way state boundaries look on the map (figure 1.3)? When you look at the boundaries in the western two-thirds of the US west of the Mississippi, you can easily see that mostly straight lines form the borders between the states, evidence that the vast western part of the United States was settled in a different way than the area east of the Mississippi, which was settled earlier. And although as you can see on the map, the area of the United States is already nicely divided up entirely into 48 sections, some say that there could be future states added to the Union.

state boundaries

### What do you think will become the 51<sup>st</sup> state?

Now that we've reminded ourselves of the fact that there are 50 states in the US – and have been since the admission of Alaska and Hawaii around 50 years ago – we can ask the question: Will there be a 51<sup>st</sup> state? Additional states are certainly possible if both the inhabitants of the areas that want to apply for statehood and the Congress of the United States agree. There has been a movement for Washington DC to gain statehood status now for several decades even with a suggested name: New Columbia. Since a change in the status of DC would require an amendment to the Constitution (🔊 5), Washington DC or New Columbia probably wouldn't be as likely to become the 51<sup>st</sup> state as would Puerto Rico, for example (🔊 6). And there's always the problem of how to add an additional star to the flag ... But let's leave the states and turn to another political division in America, the city.

additional states

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capitals state and  
national

## And what about Washington DC?

Whenever you're asked to associate a country with a city, you probably usually think of the capital. Washington isn't on the list of the ten largest cities (unless you take the metropolitan area into account), which may surprise you. But then many state capitals are, strangely enough, not the most populous or the most famous cities in the state either. To name just a few: Austin, Texas; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Lansing, Michigan; Sacramento, California; Tallahassee, Florida; and Topeka, Kansas. Washington DC, of course, isn't in any state, it's the capital of the entire United States of America. While Washington DC had the more or less unofficial status of the most dangerous city in the United States for a number of years, the official status of Washington is that of a district (DC stands for District of Columbia) and not a state although Washington could become the 51<sup>st</sup> state as we saw a bit earlier. More than two hundred years ago the US Constitution designated land to be set aside for the official capital of the newly-founded nation partly in order to solve conflicts among states that had fought to have the capital located in their states. The capital had been temporarily well-known cities like New York and Philadelphia but also smaller places like Princeton in New Jersey and Annapolis in Maryland.

contrast rich and poor

Originally Washington DC had the shape of a square made up of land taken from the two states of Virginia and Maryland until Virginia took some of the land back. The citizens of DC (who call their hometown "DC" for short) lacked any sort of representation until Congress decided to grant them the chance to elect one member to the House of Representatives, a member who had no voting rights. At least DC inhabitants gained the right to vote for the president when the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in the 60s and can also now vote for their mayor and city council. Reasons for the long lack of representation and power for DC residents include the fact that the daytime population is almost double the number of actual residents, the fact that 20% of all residents live below the poverty level, and the fact that an astonishing one third of all residents are illiterate. The contrast between rich and poor, between those with power and those with little power, can be seen as starkly in DC as anywhere else in the US. And speaking of anywhere else ...