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## About the USA – Virtual Classroom Newsletter for English Teachers

### In this issue:

Christmas & the Holiday Season | Religion in the United States: Separation of Church & State | World AIDS Day | Protecting People with Disabilities | Human Rights Day | Bill of Rights Day | Midterm Election Results | Bestsellers: Books Make Great Presents | Programs & WebChats

### Christmas and the Holiday Season

Christmas, the birthday of Jesus Christ, is the most widely celebrated religious holiday in the United States. The spiritual message of Christmas is peace, good will and understanding. That message is underlined in religious services and numerous charitable and volunteer activities.

As in Germany, in the period before Christmas, homes and stores are decorated with evergreen trees and bright, colored lights. Christmas-themed animated programs often appear on television. Some, like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, date to the mid-1960s, and are enjoyed by both children and their nostalgic parents. Many radio stations adjust their formats to feature Christmas music, sometimes exclusively, during the weeks before Christmas.

As America has grown more diverse, the traditional greeting "Merry Christmas" is often replaced with "Happy Holidays." Members of the Jewish and Muslim religions generally, for example, do not celebrate Christmas. To some extent, non-Christian holidays celebrated at roughly the same time of year -- most prominently New Year's celebrations, the Jewish Hanukkah and the African-American Kwanzaa -- blend into a broader holiday season. But what some people see as cultural sensitivity looks to others like nothing more than political correctness.

Unlike some countries, the United States does not include a question about religion in its official census. Statistics about religious adherence are obtained from surveys and organizational reporting. According to a survey in 2000, 76.5% of Americans belong to a Christian denomination. Nevertheless, a Gallup poll the same year found that 96% of Americans celebrate Christmas in some way.

The Supreme Court has addressed the constitutional parameters governing the display of religious symbols, such as a crèche or nativity figures on public property. The Court has held that government cannot itself "display or give preference to the display by others of particular religious symbols on public property" but that it can include religious symbols in generally secular holiday displays.

In some jurisdictions, calling a Christmas tree a Christmas tree has become a politically charged prospect. The President traditionally lights the National Christmas Tree, which stands south of the White House on the Ellipse. In 2005, House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert directed that the tree on the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol, known for some years as the Holiday Tree, be renamed the "Capitol Christmas Tree." Also in 2005, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California rescinded the 5-year tradition of calling the state capitol's Christmas tree a "holiday tree."



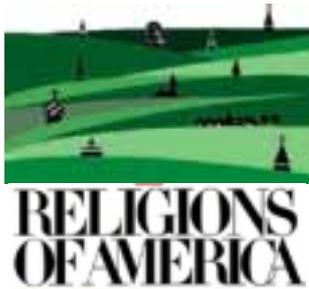
- ★ About the USA > Holidays > Christmas [usa.usembassy.de/holidays/](http://usa.usembassy.de/holidays/)
- ★ About the USA > Holidays > Ethnic & Religious Observances [usa.usembassy.de/holidays-ethnic.htm](http://usa.usembassy.de/holidays-ethnic.htm)

#### Background:

- ★ The Establishment "Claus" - A Selective Guide to the Supreme Court's Christmas Cases Law Library Resource Xchange, LLC [www.llrx.com/features/christmas.htm](http://www.llrx.com/features/christmas.htm)
- ★ Religious Symbols in Public Places (Exploring Constitutional Law - University of Missouri-Kansas City Law School) [www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/religioussymbols.htm](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/religioussymbols.htm)
- ★ The Twelve Rules of Christmas®— Guidelines for Christmas, Thanksgiving Holiday Celebrations (The Rutherford Institute) [www.rutherford.org/resources/legal-12rules.asp](http://www.rutherford.org/resources/legal-12rules.asp)
- ★ How The ACLU Didn't Steal Christmas (American Civil Liberties Union) [www.aclu.org/religion/gen/22324res20051207.html](http://www.aclu.org/religion/gen/22324res20051207.html)



- ★ No More 'Holiday' Trees At Capitol (Washington Times, Nov. 29, '05) [www.washtimes.com/metro/20051129-120703-5977r.htm](http://www.washtimes.com/metro/20051129-120703-5977r.htm)



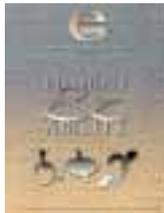
★ About the USA > Society > Religion  
[usa.usembassy.de/society-religion.htm](http://usa.usembassy.de/society-religion.htm)



★ UNAIDS  
[www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)  
★ President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief  
[www.pepfar.gov](http://www.pepfar.gov)



★ Disability & the United Nations  
[www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/)



★ Disability and Ability (Dept. of State, eJournal USA: Society & Values, Nov '06)  
[usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/1106/ijse/ijse1106.htm](http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/1106/ijse/ijse1106.htm)  
★ Disability Rights (Dept. of State)  
[usinfo.state.gov/scv/history\\_geography\\_and\\_population/civil\\_rights/disability\\_rights.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/history_geography_and_population/civil_rights/disability_rights.html)

★ Human Rights (Dept. of State)  
[www.state.gov/g/drl/hr/](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/hr/)  
★ Human Rights (IIP, Dept. of State)  
[usinfo.state.gov/dhr/human\\_rights.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/human_rights.html)



★ The First Amendment (Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute)  
[www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/First\\_amendment](http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/index.php/First_amendment)  
★ Today in History: December 15  
The Library of Congress (American Memory)  
[memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/dec15.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/dec15.html)

## Religion in the United States: Separation of Church & State

Court decisions about the celebration of Christmas are based in part on the separation between church and state in the United States. The First Amendment in the Constitution reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This clause is often construed to mean, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, that there be a "wall of separation between church and State." The founders of the United States established the doctrine of the separation between church and state to protect religion. Americans are a religious people -- and have been ever since the arrival of the first European settlers who came to North America to escape state-sponsored religion and religious persecution. Central to the discussion of religion in the U.S. is the difference between allowing the exercise of a religion and forcing someone to practice a set of beliefs that a person does not subscribe to.

## World AIDS Day – December 1

The number of people living with HIV/AIDS climbed in 2006, the 25th year since first detection of the virus, according to an annual survey of the epidemic conducted by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The update is released each year prior to the observance of World AIDS Day on December 1.

## International Day of People with a Disability - December 3

The International Day of People with a Disability, as designated by the United Nations in 1992, is celebrated every year on December 3 to mobilize support for the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. Negotiations are currently underway concerning an International Convention on the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities. The convention was presented in August 2005 and the U.N. General Assembly is expected to approve the convention unanimously in mid-December 2006.

## Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a civil rights law passed in 1990 that bars discrimination by employers, business owners or the public sector, represented a national consensus to protect the full and equal civil rights of Americans with physical or mental impairments. In the U.S. and elsewhere, efforts were made for many years to "rehabilitate" the disabled. By the 1970s, however, many physically and developmentally challenged Americans argued instead that society should remove barriers preventing them from participating more fully in civic life. Many national legislatures and international courts have used the ADA as a touchstone.

## Human Rights Day – December 10

Established in 1950, Human Rights Day commemorates the United Nation's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Considered one of the first major achievements of the UN, the declaration is the foundation of international human rights law. The drafters overcame significant differences in ideology, political systems, economic development and religious and cultural backgrounds. The principles outlined in the declaration have been written into the constitutions of some 90 countries and have inspired more than 60 human rights instruments.

## Bill of Rights Day – December 15

Every year on December 15, the United States celebrates the anniversary of the adoption of the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights comprises the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. It was adopted on December 15, 1791. The First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion, speech, and the press, and the rights of peaceful assembly and petition. Other amendments guarantee the rights of the people to form a "well-regulated militia," to keep and bear arms, the rights to private property, fair treatment for accused criminals, protection from unreasonable search and seizure, freedom from self-incrimination, a speedy and impartial jury trial, and representation by counsel.

## Midterm Election Results – 110<sup>th</sup> Congress

U.S. Democrats won a major congressional victory in the midterm elections on November 7. Democrats have been the minority party in the 435-member House of Representatives since 1994. Democrats also gained control of the 100-member U.S. Senate and seized governorships previously held by Republicans. The 110th Congress will convene in January 2007.

Democratic control of the House means Democrats will set the congressional agenda. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi was elected unanimously as the first woman to hold the powerful post of Speaker of the House in January. She says Democrats want to bring integrity and civility to Congress, and she held out the offer of cooperation to President Bush. The Democratic Party's House agenda has been published as "The First 100 Hours."

### In the first 100 hours:

- ★ We will start by cleaning up Congress, breaking the link between lobbyists and legislation and commit to pay-as-you-go, no new deficit spending.
  - ★ We will make our nation safer and we will begin by implementing the recommendations of the independent, bipartisan 9/11 Commission.
  - ★ We will make our economy fairer, and we will begin by raising the minimum wage. We will not pass a pay raise for Congress until there is an increase in the minimum wage.
  - ★ We will make health care more affordable for all Americans, and we will begin by fixing the Medicare prescription drug program, putting seniors first by negotiating lower drug prices. We will also promote stem cell research to offer real hope to the millions of American families who suffer from devastating diseases.
  - ★ We will broaden college opportunity, and we will begin by cutting interest rates for student loans in half.
  - ★ We will energize America by achieving energy independence, and we will begin by rolling back the multi-billion dollar subsidies for Big Oil.
  - ★ We will guarantee a dignified retirement, and we will begin by fighting any attempt to privatize Social Security.
  - ★ We will introduce this legislation on the first day of the new Congress, we will pass it within the first 100 legislative hours. This new direction represents the priorities of a unified Democratic Party. This is our pledge to the American people.
- [democraticleader.house.gov/about/100hours.cfm](http://democraticleader.house.gov/about/100hours.cfm)

Even though Democrats will be in the majority in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress in January, they will have limited ability to control defense and foreign policy issues. Under the U.S. Constitution, the president commands the armed forces and oversees diplomacy with other nations. But in the aftermath of the Republican Party's electoral defeats in Congress, President Bush has signaled a willingness to look at another way forward in Iraq. "I am open to any ideas that will help us achieve our goals of defeating the terrorists, and ensuring that Iraq's democratic government succeeds," Bush said. An upcoming report by the Iraq Study Commission, headed by former Secretary of State James Baker, will be a key to charting a new course.

### Diversity in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress

Record numbers of women will be serving in the 110th Congress. There will be 16 female senators and at least 70 women in the House. Nine governors will be women. The midterm elections also yielded historic political power for African Americans. Forty-two African-American representatives and one black senator, all Democrats, will join the new legislative session. At least four black lawmakers will chair committees in the House of Representatives and 17 will run subcommittees. In Minnesota, Democrat Keith Ellison is the first Muslim to be elected to the U.S. Congress and the first black congressman elected from Minnesota.

### Read more...

- ★ Midterm Elections [usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/elections.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/elections.html)
- ★ News from Voice of America (texts & media files) [www.voanews.com/english/usa.cfm](http://www.voanews.com/english/usa.cfm)
- ★ About the USA > Government [usa.usembassy.de/government.htm](http://usa.usembassy.de/government.htm)

### People to Watch



**Nancy Pelosi**

A native of Baltimore, Nancy Pelosi comes from a large Italian-American, Roman Catholic family. She has 5 children and 6 grandchildren. Her San Francisco congressional district, which she has represented since 1987, is seen as one of the most liberal in the nation. She was the first woman to become House Democratic leader (in 2002) and is now the first woman to become Speaker of the House.

[www.house.gov/pelosi/](http://www.house.gov/pelosi/)

### Speaker of the House

The Speaker of the House of Representatives symbolizes the power and authority of the House of Representatives. The position of the Speaker combines several roles: the institutional role of presiding officer and administrative head of the House, the partisan role of leader of the majority party in the House, and the representative role of an elected Member of the House. The position brings with it the power to appoint politicians to chair key bodies such as the Judiciary and Intelligence committees. As the "elect of the elect" the Speaker has perhaps the most visible job in Congress. By statute, the Speaker is also second in line, behind the Vice President, to succeed to the presidency.

[speaker.house.gov/features/intro.asp](http://speaker.house.gov/features/intro.asp)



**Defense Secretary-Designate  
Robert Gates**

Robert Gates, President Bush's nominee to become the new U.S. Defense Secretary, is a former CIA Director with decades of experience in the national security field. He has also served as the president of Texas A&M University, the 7th largest university in the U.S. Gates has been serving on the Iraq Study Group. The U.S. Senate must still confirm Gates' nomination. Confirmation hearings are scheduled to begin December 4th.

[VOA Profile](http://VOA Profile)



**James Baker, Co-Chairman of the  
Iraq Study Group**

The ISG was created in March 2006 at the direction of a bipartisan group of members of the U.S. Congress.

[www.usip.org/isg/](http://www.usip.org/isg/)

## What are Americans reading this Christmas?

In December 2005, retail sales at U.S. department stores jumped by 47% compared to November. Book stores increased sales by an average of 96%. (see [The Holiday Season, U.S. Census](#))

The most widely cited bestseller lists are those published by the [New York Times](#) and [USA Today](#). Online booksellers also provide access to the latest American bestsellers.

Find out more about bestseller lists, authors, genres, book reviews, electronic texts, book news, independent publishers and bookstores, literary and alternative periodicals and zines, weblogs broadly covering the world of arts, publishing, and libraries



[Bookspot.com](#)



[www.bookpage.com](#)



[newpages.com](#)

### InfoAlert - For More on Trends and Current Events in the United States

[infoalert.usembassy.de](#)

InfoAlert highlights recent articles and reports from leading U.S. journals and provides informed commentary on international and domestic issues.

### Recent Programs with American Authors



#### National Book Award Winner 2006!

#### Richard Powers

[About](#) | [Webchat Transcript](#)

*Richard Powers read from his award winning book, "The Echo Maker" in Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt and Cologne.*



#### Carter Revard

[About](#) (including audio and video)

*Native American poet Carter Revard read from his works in Oldenburg, Siegen, Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden and Nürnberg.*



#### Holly-Jane Rahlens

[About](#) | Video (coming soon)

*Holly-Jane Rahlens has read recently from her works at libraries in Berlin, Stralsund, Greifswald and Neubrandenburg and at 9 libraries in Rheinland-Pfalz during the "Bibliothekstage Rheinland-Pfalz 2006."*

### Webchats

Webchats allow you and your students to interact with U.S. government and private sector subject experts, academics, journalists, and everyday citizens American citizens on a wide range of topics using a chat tool over the Internet.

A webchat typically lasts for one hour. The version of chat that we use is based on an HTML webpage format. The bandwidth required to participate is minimal. There is no software to be downloaded on to your computer. Registration is, however, required.

We host local webchats to highlight our service and programs. For example, once a month educational advisers and consular officers answer questions about exchange opportunities in the United States. Check the schedule of upcoming chats and read transcripts of past events at: [www.usembassy.de/germany/chat.html](#)

We also work closely with our colleagues at the State Department in Washington. See: [usinfo.state.gov/usinfo/Products/Webchats.html](#)



[usa.usembassy.de](#)

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