Tension gripped the gray streets of East Berlin late in 1989, amid rumors that “Die Mauer,” the wall that divided the city, might soon be opened. In May Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev had announced that Moscow would no longer use its power to uphold the pro-Soviet governments of Eastern Europe. One by one, these governments fell. On October 18, the East German communist regime run by Erich Honecker collapsed, and a new, more liberal government took its place.

One of the most detested features of the old regimes had been their restrictions on travel, and as these governments disintegrated, travel barriers fell. Thousands of people poured westward in early September, for example, when Hungary opened its border with Austria. Of all the physical barriers preventing free travel, the most notorious was the Berlin Wall. The Russians had built it in 1961, at a time of bitter East-West conflict. Snaking ninety-six miles around the city and ramming through its heart, this concrete and barbed-wire barrier with 302 watchtowers and armed guards had stood for nearly thirty years as a stark emblem of Cold War oppression and divisions.

Passage was permitted only at three closely guarded checkpoints, nicknamed Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie by the U.S. military. Checkpoint Charlie, the most famous of the three, was the scene of several Cold War spy exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union. Nearly two hundred people had been shot trying to escape across the Wall, and more than
three thousand arrested. (An estimated five thousand had succeeded.) On the West Berlin side, the Wall was covered with colorful graffiti that defied its grim expanse.

In 1963 President Kennedy had visited the Wall and uttered his memorable proclamation, “Ich bin ein Berliner” (“I am a Berliner”). In 1987 President Reagan had made the pilgrimage, demanding, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

Now the end had come. One of the first acts of the new East German government was to remove the restrictions on free movement within Berlin. At a press conference on November 9, 1989, a government official was asked when the travel ban would be lifted. He replied (in German), “Well, as far as I can see . . ., immediately.”

This was the news East Berliners had been waiting for. Thousands rushed to the Wall and demanded that the crossing points be opened. At 10:30 P.M. the guards flung open the gates. Pandemonium resulted. As East Berliners joyously poured through, West Berliners greeted them with flowers, tears, and shouts of welcome. Declared one old woman, “Ick glob es erst, wenn icke dritten bin” (“I won’t believe it until I’m on the other side.”) A blind man made the crossing simply to breathe the air of freedom, he said. Giddy young people danced on the Wall itself. Families divided for years were reunited.

The glare of TV lights, beaming the event worldwide via communications satellites, added a surreal quality to the scene. This was not only a watershed moment in world affairs, but also one of the first truly real-time global media events. Americans sat glued to their sets as CNN and other networks carried the story live.

The celebrations went on for days. Famed Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovitch gave an impromptu concert at the Wall. East Berliners who visited West Berlin's giant Ka De We department store were given one hundred deutsche marks (the West German currency) as a welcoming gift. Hundreds of Berliners whom the newspapers dubbed “woodpeckers” attacked the Wall with picks, chisels, and hammers to gather chunks of concrete as souvenirs or simply to share in its destruction.

The official demolition began in June 1990. Workers mobilizing bulldozers, cranes, and other heavy equipment worked through the summer and fall. By November, the wall had disappeared, except for a few sections left for commemorative purposes. A hated Cold War symbol had faded into history.

The end of the Cold War and the global events of the immediate post-Cold War era provide the framework of the early parts of this chapter. At first, the Soviet Union's shocking collapse brought an enormous sigh of relief in the United States. An era of great danger was over; surely the future would be safer and more tranquil. As the initial euphoria faded, however, Americans realized that the world remained a threatening and unsettled place. While U.S. leaders struggled to come to terms with the new post-Cold War world order, an immediate crisis arose in the Middle East as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded oil-rich Kuwait, forcing Reagan’s successor, President George Bush, to respond.

Changes were underway at home as well as abroad. When Bill Clinton replaced George Bush in the White House in 1993, domestic policy moved front and center. This chapter also discusses home-front politics and culture in the 1990s, as well as long-term social and economic trends, the effect of which became particularly visible in this eventful decade. U.S. history has always been a story of change, and the changes came at a dizzying pace as the twentieth century ended.
This chapter focuses on five major questions:

- What major events marked the end of the Cold War, and why did the long conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union end so suddenly?
- How effectively did George Bush, President Reagan’s successor, cope with the “new world order” that emerged with the end of the Cold War?
- What key themes dominated Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign and the early years of his presidency?
- What long-term social and economic trends had the greatest effect on the United States at the end of the twentieth century?
- How did U.S. popular culture reflect the prosperity of the 1990s, and what issues divided Americans in the “culture wars” of these years?

**The Bush Years: Global Resolve, Domestic Drift, 1988–1993**

Ronald Reagan’s vice president, George Bush, elected president in his own right in 1988, was a patrician in politics. The son of a Connecticut senator, he had attended Yale and fought in World War II before entering the Texas oil business. He had served in Congress, lost a Senate race, been U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and directed the CIA before being tapped as Ronald Reagan’s running mate in 1980.

As president, Bush compiled an uneven record. Internationally, his administration responded cautiously but positively to upheavals in the Soviet Union that signaled the end of the Cold War. Bush also reacted decisively when Iraq invaded Kuwait, took positive steps in Latin America, and worked to ease Israeli-Palestinian tensions. Bush’s domestic record was thin, however, as he typically substituted platitudes for policy.

**The Election of 1988**

As the 1988 election approached, Vice President Bush easily won the Republican presidential nomination. A large group of Democratic contenders eventually narrowed to two: Jesse Jackson and Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. Jackson, preaching concern for the poor and urging a full-scale war on drugs, ran well in the primaries. But Dukakis’s victories in major primary states like New York and California proved decisive. As his running mate, Dukakis chose Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen.

Accepting the Republican nomination, Bush called for a “kinder, gentler America” and pledged, “Read my lips: no new taxes.” As his running mate he selected Senator Dan Quayle of Indiana, the son of a wealthy newspaper publisher. In the campaign Bush stressed Reagan’s achievements while distancing himself from the Iran-contra scandal. Emphasizing peace and prosperity, he pointed to better Soviet relations, low inflation, and the 14 million new jobs created during the 1980s—an achievement unmatched by any other industrial nation.

A TV commercial aired by Bush supporters, playing on racist stereotypes, featured a black man who committed rape and murder after his release under a Massachusetts prisoner-furlough program. Bush assailed Dukakis’s veto of a bill requiring Massachusetts schoolchildren to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, even though the Supreme Court had found such laws unconstitutional. In response, Dukakis emphasized his accomplishments as governor. “This election is not about ideology, it’s about competence,” he insisted. He hammered at the failures of the “Swiss-cheese” Reagan economy and urged “Reagan Democrats” to return to the fold. But Dukakis seemed edgy and defensive, and his dismissal of ideology made it difficult for him to define his vision of America. Even Dukakis supporters wearied of his stock phrases and his repeated boasts of his managerial skills.

Both candidates avoided serious issues in favor of TV-oriented “photo opportunities” and “sound bites.” Bush visited flag factories and military plants. Dukakis proved his toughness on defense by posing in a tank. Editorial writers grumbled about the “junk-food” campaign, but fleeting visual images, catchy phrases, and twenty-second spots on the evening news had seemingly become the essence of presidential politics.

On November 8 Bush carried forty states and garnered 54 percent of the vote. Dukakis prevailed in only ten states plus the District of Columbia. The Democrats, however, retained control of both houses of Congress and most state legislatures.

**The Cold War Ends**

The collapse of Soviet power symbolized by the opening of the Berlin Wall proceeded with breathtaking rapidity. Germany reunited for the first time since 1945. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the Baltic republics forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union on the eve of World War II,
declared independence. Calls for autonomy resounded within the other Soviet republics as well.

The Cold War was over. In August 1991 President Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev signed a treaty in Moscow reducing their strategic nuclear arsenals by 25 percent. The nuclear-arms race seemed to be over as well. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney proposed a 25 percent reduction in U.S. military forces over five years. With the Soviet-sponsored Warsaw Pact ended, NATO announced plans for a 50 percent troop reduction.

As the Soviet Communist party’s centralized control collapsed, the nation’s economy sank into crisis. Soviet reformers called for a market economy on the Western model. In August 1991 hard-line Communist leaders in Moscow tried to overthrow Gorbachev, but thousands of Muscovites, rallied by Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Republic, protectively surrounded the Russian parliament, and the coup failed. Yeltsin increasingly assumed a dominant role.

Exuberant crowds toppled statues of Lenin and other communist leaders across the Soviet Union. Leningrad resumed its tsarist name, St. Petersburg. As the various Soviet republics rushed to independence, Gorbachev was overwhelmed by forces he himself had unleashed. The coup attempt thoroughly discredited the Soviet Communist party. Late in 1991 most of the Soviet republics proclaimed the end of the USSR. Bowing to the inevitable, Gorbachev resigned.

Secretary of State James Baker, a long-time Bush ally who had been chief of staff and Treasury secretary under Reagan, proceeded cautiously as the Soviet empire disintegrated. U.S. influence was limited, in any event, as long-suppressed forces of nationalism and ethnicity burst forth in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union.

One issue of vital concern was the future of the Soviet arsenal of twenty-seven thousand nuclear weapons, based not only in Russia but in newly independent Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Baker worked to ensure the security of these weapons and to prevent nuclear know-how from leaking out to other nations or terrorist groups. As strategic talks with Yeltsin and other leaders went forward, Bush announced further major reductions in the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

For decades the superpowers had backed their client states and rebel insurgencies throughout the Third World. As the Cold War faded, the prospect for resolving some local disputes brightened. In Nicaragua, for example, Bush abandoned Reagan’s failed policy of financing the contra’s war against the leftist Sandinista government. Instead, Bush and Congress worked out a program aimed at reintegrating the contras into Nicaraguan life and politics. In the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, a multiparty anti-Sandinista coalition emerged victorious.

Poverty, ignorance, and economic exploitation still plagued Latin America, however, and open guerrilla war continued in Peru. The flow of cocaine and heroin to U.S. cities from the region posed a serious problem as well. In December 1989 concern over the drug traffic led to a U.S. invasion of Panama to capture the nation’s strongman ruler, General Manuel Noriega. Formerly on the CIA payroll, Noriega had accepted bribes to permit drugs to pass through Panama on their way north. Convicted of drug trafficking, Noriega received a life prison term.

America’s relations with the Philippines, a former colony and long-time U.S. ally, shifted as well. In 1991
the Philippines legislature ended the agreement by which the United States had maintained two naval bases in the islands. With the Cold War over, the Bush administration accepted this decision and closed the bases.

In a key development, U.S. policy helped bring an end to South Africa’s policy of racial segregation, called apartheid. In 1986, over a Reagan veto, Congress had imposed economic sanctions against white-ruled South Africa, including a ban on U.S. corporate investment. This action, strongly endorsed by U.S. black leaders, reflected an anti-apartheid campaign led by South African Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu. Economic sanctions by America and other nations hastened change in South Africa. In 1990 the government released black leader Nelson Mandela after long imprisonment and opened negotiations with Mandela’s African National Congress. When South Africa scrapped much of its apartheid policy in 1991, President Bush lifted the economic sanctions.

China proved an exception to the world trend toward greater freedom. Improved relations with China suffered a grievous setback in 1989, when the Chinese army crushed a prodemocracy demonstration by masses of unarmed students in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, killing several hundred young men and women. A wave of repression, arrests, and public executions followed. The Bush administration protested, curtailed diplomatic contacts, and urged international financial institutions to postpone loans to China. But Bush, strongly committed to U.S. trade expansion, did not break diplomatic relations or cancel trade agreements with China.

As the Cold War faded, trade issues loomed large. The U.S. trade deficit with Japan stirred special concern. Although this gap dropped from its 1987 high, it still hovered at $43 billion in 1991. Early in 1992, facing a recession and rising unemployment in an election year, President Bush turned a planned Asian trip into a trade mission. He took along a team of business leaders, including the heads of the “big three” U.S. auto companies, who tried, with little success, to persuade the Japanese to buy more U.S. products. When Bush collapsed and vomited from a sudden attack of flu at a state dinner in Tokyo, some found the mishap unhappily symbolic.

**Operation Desert Storm**

As the Bush administration cautiously charted a course in the post-Cold War world, one unexpected crisis brought a clear-cut, forceful response. On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded the neighboring nation of Kuwait. Iraq’s dictator, Saddam Hussein, had long dismissed Kuwait’s ruling sheiks as puppets of Western imperialists and asserted Iraq’s historic claims to Kuwait’s vast oilfields.

Under Saddam, Iraq for years had threatened not only Kuwait but also other Arab nations as well as Israel. Iraq’s military program, including both chemical- and nuclear-weapons projects, had worried many governments. During the Iran-Iraq war, however, the United States had favored Iraq over Iran, and even assisted Iraq’s military buildup (see Chapter 30). But Iran’s anti-Americanism eased after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, removing this incentive for the United States to tilt toward Iraq. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Washington reacted quickly.

Avoiding Lyndon Johnson’s mistakes in the Vietnam era, Bush built a consensus for a clear military objective—Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait—in Congress, at the United Nations, and among the American people. He deployed more than four hundred thousand troops in Saudi Arabia to achieve that goal. The U.N. imposed economic sanctions against Iraq and insisted that Saddam withdraw by January 15, 1991. On January 12, on divided votes, the Senate and the House endorsed military action against Iraq. Most Democrats voted against war, favoring continued economic sanctions instead.

The air war began on January 16. For six weeks B-52 and F-16 bombers pounded Iraqi troops, supply depots, and command targets in Iraq’s capital, Baghdad. The air forces of other nations participated as well. In retaliation, Saddam fired Soviet-made Scud missiles against Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities, as well as against the Saudi capital, Riyadh. Americans watched transfixed as CNN showed U.S. Patriot missiles streaking off to intercept incoming Scuds. As portrayed on TV, the war seemed a glorified video game. The reality of many thousands of Iraqi deaths, military and civilian, hardly impinged on the national consciousness.

On February 23 two hundred thousand U.S. troops under General H. Norman Schwarzkopf moved across the desert toward Kuwait (see Map 31.1). Although rain turned the roadless sands to soup, the army pushed on. Iraqi soldiers either fled or surrendered en masse. U.S. forces destroyed thirty-seven hundred Iraqi tanks while losing only three. With Iraqi resistance crushed, President Bush declared a cease-fire, and Kuwait’s ruling family returned from various safe havens where they had sat out the war. U.S. casualties numbered 148 dead—including 35 killed inadvertently by U.S. firepower—and 467 wounded.
Despite some campus protests, the war enjoyed broad public support. After the victory celebrations, however, the outcome seemed less than decisive. Saddam still held power. His army brutally suppressed uprisings by Shiite Muslims in the south and ethnic Kurds in the north. Saddam agreed to grant U.N. inspection teams access to his weapons-production facilities, but reneged on this agreement within a few years. Despite the stunning military success of 1991, Iraq remained a thorn in the flesh for the United States and its U.N. allies.

**Home-Front Discontents: Economic, Racial, and Environmental Problems**

In the early 1990s some of the longer-term effects of the Reagan-era tax cuts, Pentagon spending, and deregulatory fervor began to be felt. As the economy soured, the go-go climate of the 1980s seemed remote, and discontent increased, especially among the middle class.

First came the collapse of the savings-and-loan (S&L) industry, which had long provided home loans to borrowers and a modest but secure return to depositors. As interest rates rose in the late 1970s because of inflation, the S&Ls had been forced to pay high interest to attract deposits, even though most of their assets were in long-term, fixed-rate mortgages. In the early 1980s money freed up by the Reagan tax cuts flowed into S&Ls that were offering high rates of return. In the fever to deregulate, the rules governing S&Ls were eased. Caught up in the high-flying mood of the decade, S&Ls nationwide made risky loans on speculative real-estate ventures. As the economy cooled, many of these investments went bad. In 1988–1990, nearly six hundred S&Ls failed, especially in the Southwest, wiping out many depositors’ savings.

Because the government insures savings-and-loan deposits, the Bush administration in 1989 set up a program to repay depositors and sell hundreds of foreclosed office towers and apartment buildings in a depressed real-estate market. Estimates of the bailout’s cost topped $400 billion. “‘Savings and loan,’” wrote a journalist, “had become synonymous with ‘bottomless pit.’”

The federal deficit, another problem linked to the Reagan tax cuts and military spending, continued to mount. In 1990 Congress and Bush agreed on a five-year
deficit-reduction plan involving spending cuts and tax increases. Bush would pay a high political price for this retreat from his 1988 campaign pledge, “Read my lips: no new taxes.” Despite the agreement, the red ink flowed on. The deficit reached $290 billion in 1992. The Gulf War, the S&L bailout, and soaring welfare and Medicare/Medicaid payments combined to undercut the budget-balancing effort.

To make matters worse, recession struck in 1990. Retail sales slumped; housing starts declined. The U.S. auto industry, battered by Japanese imports, fared disastrously. GM cut its work force by more than seventy thousand. Hard times hung on into 1992, with a jobless rate of more than 7 percent. As the states’ tax revenues fell, they slashed social-welfare funding. The number of Americans below the poverty line rose by 2.1 million in 1990, to about 34 million. As the economy stumbled, the plight of the poor roused resentment rather than sympathy. Political strategists diagnosed a middle-class phenomenon they called “compassion fatigue.” Declared Ohio’s governor, “Most Ohioans have had enough welfare, enough poverty, enough drugs, enough crime.”

In this bleaker economic climate, many Americans took a second look at Reaganism. If 1984 was “morning in America,” wrote a columnist, quoting a Reagan campaign slogan, this was “the morning after.”

For middle-class Americans the recession was more anxiety-producing than desperate. For the poor it could be disastrous. In April 1992 an outbreak of arson and looting erupted in a poor black district of Los Angeles. The immediate cause was black rage and incredulity (shared by many others) over a jury’s acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers whose beating of a black motorist, Rodney King, had been filmed on videotape. For several days the explosion of anger and pent-up frustration raged, leaving some forty persons dead and millions in property damage, and again reminding the nation of the desperate conditions in its inner cities.

The Bush administration did little to address these issues. In 1990, when Congress passed a bill broadening federal protection against job discrimination, Bush vetoed it, claiming that it encouraged racial quotas in hiring. (In 1991, announcing that his concerns had been met, Bush signed a similar bill.) When Bush came to Atlanta in 1992 to observe Martin Luther King Day, King’s daughter, a minister, asked bitterly, “How dare we celebrate in the midst of a recession, when nobody is sure whether their jobs are secure?”

The recession also stung public school budgets. Bush proclaimed himself the “education president” but addressed the issue only fitfully. He called for national testing of schoolchildren, supported a voucher system by which parents could enroll their children in private schools at public expense, and urged corporate America to fund experimental schools. Such proposals hardly matched the magnitude of the problems facing the public-school system.

One measure supported by Bush, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, did have significant educational implications. This law, barring discrimination against disabled persons, improved job and educational opportunities for the handicapped. Thanks in part to the measure, the number of physically or cognitively impaired children attending public schools rose from 4.4 million to 5.6 million in the 1990s.

Environmental concerns surged in March 1989 when a giant oil tanker, the Exxon Valdez, ran aground in Alaska’s Prince William Sound and spilled more than 10 million gallons of crude oil. The accident fouled coastal and marine habitats, killed thousands of sea otters and shore birds, and jeopardized Alaska’s herring and salmon industries. That summer the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reported that air pollution in more than one hundred U.S. cities exceeded federal...
standards. A 1991 EPA study found that pollutants were depleting the ozone shield—the layer of the atmosphere that protects human life from cancer-causing solar radiation—at twice the rate scientists had predicted.

Squeezed between public worries and corporate calls for a go-slow policy, Bush compiled a mixed environmental record. He deplored the Exxon Valdez spill but defended oil exploration and drilling. In a bipartisan effort, the White House and the Democratic Congress passed a toughened Federal Clean Air Act in 1990. (California and other states enacted even stricter laws, tightening auto-emission standards, for example.) In addition, the government began the costly task of disposing of radioactive wastes and cleaning up nuclear facilities that in some cases had been contaminating the soil and ground water for years.

The Bush administration more often downgraded environmental concerns. It scuttled treaties on global warming and mining in Antarctica, backed oil exploration in Alaskan wilderness preserves, and proposed to open vast tracts of protected wetlands to developers. Vice President Quayle openly ridiculed environmentalists. Bush’s defensive, self-serving speech to a U.N.-sponsored environmental conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 further alienated environmentalists.

The Supreme Court Moves Right

Like all presidents, Reagan and Bush sought to perpetuate their political ideology through their Supreme Court choices. In addition to the Sandra Day O’Connor appointment (see Chapter 30), Reagan named William Rehnquist as chief justice, replacing Warren Burger, and chose another conservative, Antonin Scalia, to fill the Burger vacancy. When another vacancy opened in 1987, Reagan nominated Robert Bork, a judge and legal scholar whose rigidity and doctrinaire opposition to judicial activism led the Senate to reject him. Reagan’s next nominee withdrew after admitting that he had smoked marijuana. Reagan’s third choice, Anthony Kennedy, a conservative California jurist, won quick confirmation.

President Bush made two Court nominations: David Souter in 1990 and Clarence Thomas in 1991. Souter, a New Hampshire judge, won easy confirmation, but Thomas proved controversial. Bush nominated him to replace Thurgood Marshall, a black who had fought segregation as an NAACP lawyer. Thomas, also an African American, was notable mainly for supporting conservative causes and opposing affirmative-action programs. Having risen from poverty to attend Yale Law School and to head the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Thomas viewed individual effort, not government programs, as the avenue of black progress. Noting his lack of qualifications, critics charged Bush with playing racial politics.

The nomination became even more contentious when a former Thomas associate at EEOC, Anita Hill, accused him of sexual harassment. As the Senate Judiciary Committee probed Hill’s accusations, the face-off dominated the nation’s TV screens and heightened awareness of the harassment issue. In the end, Thomas narrowly won confirmation and joined the court.

These conservative appointments blunted the liberal social-activist thrust of the Court that began in the 1930s and continued in the 1950s and 1960s under Chief Justice Earl Warren and others. In 1990–1991 the Court narrowed the rights of arrested persons and upheld federal regulations barring physicians in federally funded clinics from discussing abortion with their clients. In a 5-to-4 decision in 1992, the Supreme Court upheld a Pennsylvania law further restricting abortion rights. The majority, however, did affirm Roe v. Wade, the 1973 decision upholding women’s constitutional right to an abortion.
The Politics of Frustration

In the afterglow of Operation Desert Storm, George Bush's approval ratings hit an amazing 88 percent, only to fall below 50 percent as the recession hit home. In 1991 the *New York Times* dammingly described him as “shrewd and energetic in foreign policy . . . , clumsy and irresolute at home . . . . The domestic Bush flops like a fish, leaving the impression that he doesn't know what he thinks or doesn't much care, apart from the political gains to be extracted from an issue.” In January 1992 Bush offered various recession-fighting proposals, including tax breaks for home buyers, lower taxes on capital gains, and tax incentives for business investment. Democrats dismissed this initiative as politically motivated and inadequate to the problem.

Intimidated by Bush's post-Desert Storm popularity, top Democrats had stayed out of the 1992 presidential race. But Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas took the plunge and, despite rumors of his marital infidelity, defeated other hopefuls in the primaries and won the nomination. As his running mate, Clinton chose Senator Al Gore of Tennessee. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, Clinton pledged an activist government addressing the environment, health care, and the economy. On abortion, he was strongly pro-choice. As he oriented the party toward the middle class and muted its concern with the poor, traditional liberals and black leaders expressed uneasiness.

President Bush easily quashed a primary challenge by conservative columnist Pat Buchanan, but the Republican right dominated the party convention. Buchanan and evangelist Pat Robertson gave divisive speeches urging a GOP crusade for “family values” and denouncing abortion, sexual permissiveness, radical feminism, and gay rights. Delegates who belonged to Robertson's Christian Coalition cheered, but moderate Republicans deplored this rightward turn.

One gauge of voter discontent was the presidential race of political outsider H. Ross Perot. At the peak of “Perotmania,” nearly 40 percent of the voters supported the Texan, who had grown rich as founder of a data-processing firm. The nation's economic problems were simple, Perot insisted on TV talk shows; only party politics stood in the way of solving them. As president he would conduct electronic “town meetings” by which voters would judge his proposals. Perot's eccentricities and thin-skinned response to critics turned off many potential supporters, but he remained an unpredictable wild card in the election.

Bush attacked Clinton's character and charged that he had evaded the draft during the Vietnam War. Addressing public concerns about the recession, Bush promised to put James A. Baker in charge of domestic affairs in a second term. Clinton, meanwhile, focused on the stagnant economy and the problems of the middle class. He pledged to work for a national health-care system, welfare reform, and a national industrial policy to promote economic recovery and new technologies.

In the election, 43 percent of the voters chose Clinton. Bush trailed with 38 percent, and Perot amassed 19 percent—the largest share for a third-party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose campaign in 1912. Clinton, carrying such key states as California, Ohio, and New Jersey, lured back many blue-collar and suburban “Reagan Democrats” and partially reclaimed the South for the Democrats. Younger voters, who had tilted Republican in the 1980s, went for Clinton in 1992.

Most incumbents in Congress won reelection. In Pennsylvania, Republican Senator Arlen Specter, a Judiciary Committee member who had angered women by his harsh questioning of Anita Hill in the Clarence Thomas hearings, narrowly beat back a woman challenger. Congress was becoming less of a white male club. Thirty-eight African Americans and seventeen Hispanics won election. Colorado elected American Indian Ben Nighthorse Campbell to the Senate, and a California congressional district sent the first Korean-American to Washington.

California became the first state to elect two women senators, Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein. Illinois sent the first African-American woman to the Senate, Carol Moseley Braun. Overall, the new Congress included fifty-three women: six in the Senate and forty-seven in the House. This outcome encouraged feminists who had proclaimed 1992 the “Year of the Woman.”

The 1992 election marked a shift of voter attention to domestic issues as the Cold War faded. With Democrats in control of both the legislative and executive branches, the end of the much-deplored Washington “gridlock” seemed possible. In the hopeful beginnings of his term, President Bill Clinton eagerly engaged the formidable challenges facing the nation.


George Bush was of the generation shaped by World War II. William Jefferson Clinton—or Bill, as he preferred—was a baby boomer formed by Vietnam, JFK, and the Beatles. Born in Arkansas in 1946, he admired Elvis Presley, played the saxophone, and thought of becoming
a pop musician. Graduation from Georgetown University and Yale Law School, and a stint at Oxford University as a Rhodes scholar, roused an interest in politics. After marrying his law-school classmate Hillary Rodham, he won the Arkansas governorship in 1979, at age thirty-two.

Clinton began his presidency with high energy. But his administration soon encountered rough waters, and the 1994 midterm election produced a Republican landslide. The newly energized congressional Republicans pursued their conservative agenda, including—with Clinton's cooperation—a sweeping welfare-reform law.

**Shaping a Domestic Agenda**

In contrast to Republican predecessors like Nixon and Bush, Clinton preferred domestic issues to foreign policy. Of course, no modern president can wholly neglect world issues, and Clinton and his first secretary of state, Warren Christopher, confronted an array of diplomatic challenges: ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Somalia, trade negotiations with China, an evolving new framework of world trade, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (For a full discussion of Clinton-era foreign-policy issues, see Chapter 32.) For the most part, however, global issues took a back seat to domestic policy in the Clinton era.

Clinton and Vice President Al Gore were leaders of the New Democratic Coalition, the group of moderates who sought to shed the party's reputation for high taxes and heavy spending. Trying to win back middle-class and blue-collar voters, Clinton's campaign stressed Middle America's concerns: the recession, health care, and runaway welfare costs. Clinton also embraced causes that had inspired activists of his generation, including abortion rights, environmental concerns, and feminism.

Clinton named women to head the Departments of Justice, Energy, and Health and Human Services; the Council of Economic Advisers; the Environmental Protection Agency; the United Nations delegation; and (in 1994) the Bureau of the Budget. To fill a Supreme Court vacancy in 1993, he nominated Judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg. (To fill a second vacancy in 1994, Clinton nominated moderate liberal Stephen G. Breyer, a federal judge in Boston.) Clinton appointed his wife Hillary Rodham to head the Task Force on National Health-Care Reform.

Clinton's early weeks in office proved rocky. His effort to fulfill a campaign pledge to end the exclusion of homosexuals from military service provoked much controversy. A study commission eventually crafted a compromise summed up in the phrase "Don't ask, don't tell."

Amid a recession and high budget deficits, Clinton promised to focus "like a laser beam" on the economy. His economic program, offered in February 1993, proposed spending cuts (especially in military appropriations) and tax increases to ease the budget deficit. Clinton also proposed new spending to stimulate job creation and economic growth. In August Congress passed an economic plan that incorporated Clinton's spending cuts and tax increases but not his economic-stimulus package. Enactment of even a modified budget plan spared Clinton a major early embarrassment.

Clinton also endorsed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiated by the Bush administration. This pact admitted Mexico to the free-trade zone earlier created by the United States and Canada. While critics warned that low-wage jobs would flee to Mexico, NAFTA backers, including most economists, predicted a net gain in jobs as Mexican markets opened to U.S. products. The House passed NAFTA by a comfortable margin in 1993, handing Clinton another welcome victory.

An improving economy eased pressures on Clinton to devise an economic-stimulus program. By 1994 the unemployment rate fell to the lowest point in more than four years. Inflation remained under control as well, owing to interest-rate increases by the Federal Reserve Board and a weakening of the OPEC oil cartel. In constant dollars, crude oil cost about the same in 1993 as it had in 1973, before the cycle of OPEC price increases. The 1994 federal deficit dropped as well, with further decline expected.

Meanwhile, Hillary Rodham Clinton's health-care task force, working mainly in secret, devised a sweeping reform plan. Providing universal coverage, the plan mandated that employers pay 80 percent of workers' health-insurance costs. To cover start-up expenses, the plan proposed new taxes on tobacco. The proposal also addressed the serious problem of spiraling health-care costs. From 1980 to 1992 government Medicare and Medicaid payments ballooned from 8 percent to 14 percent of the federal budget. Without controls, analysts calculated, total U.S. health spending would soon consume 20 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. The plan's cost-containment provisions included regional health-care purchasing cooperatives, caps on health-insurance premiums and on Medicare and Medicaid payments, and a national health board to monitor costs.

Lobbyists for doctors, the insurance industry, tobacco companies, retired persons, and hospital associations all worked to defeat the plan. Critics also attacked the secretive way the plan had been formulated. By fall 1994
health-care reform was stalled, at a heavy cost to the Clinton presidency. The administration had misread public complaints about medical costs and about bureaucratic red tape as support for a radical overhaul of the system. But the problems that had triggered the administration’s reform effort persisted, and health care remained on the political agenda.

As the economy improved, crime and welfare reform topped voter concerns. In response, Clinton in 1994 proposed an anticrime bill to fund drug treatment, more prisons and police officers, boot camps for first-time offenders, and a ban on assault weapons. After much partisan maneuvering, Congress enacted a crime bill similar to Clinton’s proposal.

Clinton’s 1994 welfare-reform bill fulfilled a campaign pledge to “end welfare as we know it.” Under Clinton’s bill, all able-bodied recipients of payments from the government’s major welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), would have to go to work after two years, in a public-service job if necessary. The bill included job training and child-care provisions, as well as measures to force absent fathers (“deadbeat dads”) to support their offspring. It also permitted states to deny additional payments to welfare mothers who bore more children. Congress took no action on Clinton’s bill, but this issue, too, remained high on the public agenda.

By mid-1994 Clinton’s approval ratings had dropped to 42 percent. Many found him too ready to compromise and too inclined to flit from issue to issue. Exploiting the “character issue,” critics publicized various questionable dealings from the Clintons’ Arkansas days, including their involvement in a shady real estate speculation, the Whitewater Development Company. The 1993 suicide of assistant White House counsel Vincent Foster, the Clintons’ close friend, whetted the interest of conspiracy theorists. Charges of sexual harassment, first aired during the campaign, resurfaced in 1994 when Paula Jones, an Arkansas state employee, alleged in a lawsuit that Clinton had solicited sexual favors when he was governor.

As Clinton proved vulnerable, the political climate turned nasty. Radio commentator Rush Limbaugh won celebrity with his jeering attacks on liberals. Televangelist Jerry Falwell offered a videotape suggesting that Clinton had arranged the murder of political enemies. Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition mobilized voters at the local level. By 1994, with some nine hundred chapters nationwide, the Christian Coalition controlled several state Republican parties. With its passion and organizational energy, the religious Right represented a potent force in American politics of the 1990s.

1994: A Sharp Right Turn

Bill Clinton had won in 1992 as a “new Democrat” offering fresh ideas, but by 1994 many voters saw him as simply an old Democrat of the big-government, “tax-and-spend” variety. His early call for an end to the ban on homosexuals in the military convinced some that special-interest groups controlled the White House agenda. To his critics, Clinton’s failed health-care plan epitomized the dead end of a New Deal/Great Society style of top-down reform. The “character issue” further undermined Clinton’s standing, as did his reputation as hopelessly indecisive. Commented Jesse Jackson, “When the president comes to a fork in the road, he chooses the fork.”

Meanwhile, a movement to downsize government, reform welfare, slash taxes and spending, and shift power to the states gained momentum among the middle class. A bubbling brew of cultural and social issues added to the disaffection. These included such emotional topics as abortion, pornography, school prayer, “radical feminism,” affirmative action, and an alleged collapse of “family values.”
A network of conservative organizations orchestrated the rightward swing. As the Christian Coalition mobilized evangelicals, the National Rifle Association (NRA) contributed to candidates who opposed restrictions on firearms. Conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation funded studies critiquing liberal policies. Limbaugh and other conservative radio commentators continued to denounce the “liberal elite.”

Normally, prosperity helps the party in power, but not in 1994, in part because the recovery did little for ordinary Americans. Adjusted for inflation, the actual buying power of the average worker’s paycheck fell from 1986 to 1990, and remained flat through the 1990s. Automation, foreign competition, an influx of immigrants into the labor market, and the weakness of organized labor all combined to keep average wages down. In October 1994 an ominous 58 percent of Americans told pollsters that they felt no better off despite the economic upturn.

Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich of Georgia shrewdly translated the disgruntled mood into Republican votes. In a photogenic ceremony on the Capitol steps, some three hundred Republican candidates signed Gingrich’s “Contract with America” pledging tax cuts, congressional term limits, tougher crime laws, a balanced-budget amendment, and other popular reforms.

In a Republican landslide that November, voters gave the GOP control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1954; increased the number of Republican governors to thirty-one; and cut down such Democratic giants as New York Governor Mario Cuomo and Texas Governor Ann Richards. Only 38 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, so the great shift rightward was actually achieved by about one-fifth of the total electorate. Still, a significant ideological change seemed under way.

Evangelical Christians flocked to the polls, mostly to vote for GOP candidates. Republican strategists hailed the election as the death knell of the activist, big-government tradition, and a further step in a conservative resurgence launched by Barry Goldwater in 1964. Republican governors like Wisconsin’s Tommy Thompson, a champion of welfare reform, insisted that the states, not Washington, were now the best source of policy ideas. In the Senate, Republican Robert Dole of Kansas became majority leader; the reactionary Jesse Helms of North Carolina ascended to the chairmanship of the Foreign Relations Committee; and ninety-two-year-old Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, presidential candidate of the States Rights (Dixiecrat) party in 1948, headed the Armed Services Committee.

In the House of Representatives, a jubilant horde of 230 Republicans, 73 of them newly elected, chose Newt Gingrich as Speaker by acclamation, made Rush Limbaugh an “honorary member,” and set about enacting the “Contract with America.” One early bill forbade unfunded mandates, by which Washington had imposed regulations on the states without providing money to cover the costs. A constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget passed by the House was narrowly rejected by the Senate.

On the cultural front, House Republicans targeted such “liberal elite” institutions as the Public Broadcasting Corporation and the National Endowments for the Arts. Fulfilling pledges to restore morality and uphold family values, Congress passed legislation to increase the government’s power to combat obscenity in the mass media and curb pornography on the Internet. Other “Contract with America” issues, including repeal of a 1993 ban on assault weapons (the NRA’s top priority), awaited their turn.

GOP leaders also promised tax credits and benefits for the middle class and the wealthy that, if enacted, would have gutted the Tax Reform Act of 1986, which had been designed to eliminate tax breaks and loopholes. As in the Reagan years, the promise of tax cuts coupled with increased defense spending threatened worse budget deficits, but Republican leaders insisted that large savings could be achieved in other parts of the budget. Where these savings would come from was unclear, since the biggest budget items apart from defense were mandatory interest payments on the national debt and two programs sacred to the middle class, social security and Medicare.

The torrent of bills, hearings, and press releases of early 1995 recalled the heady days of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and even the early years of FDR’s New Deal. Now, however, the activist energy came from conservatives, not from liberals.

For a time, House Speaker Newt Gingrich displayed a cockiness that struck many as arrogance. He stumbled early in 1995, however, when he first accepted, and then turned down, a $4.5 million book-royalty advance from a publishing house owned by Rupert Murdoch, a publishing tycoon with vital interests in federal legislation. Journalists also focused on Gingrich’s network of political action groups, dubbed “Newt, Inc.,” funded by corporate money and conservative foundations. Attacking “left-wing elitists,” the Georgia firebrand praised laissez-faire sink-or-swim individualism and challenged the entire structure of social programs and federal-state relations that had evolved since the New Deal.
On the foreign-relations front, the 1994 Republican landslide signaled a turn inward. Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” largely ignored foreign policy, and key Republican legislators pushed isolationist views. Jesse Helms denounced the United Nations, criticized environmental treaties, and saw little good in U.N. peacekeeping efforts or America’s $14 billion foreign-aid program. Congressional Republicans refused to pay America’s $1 billion in past U.N. dues. Even the Clinton administration felt the pressure. Yielding to Pentagon objections, Clinton rejected a multinational treaty banning land mines. The isolationist upsurge dismayed those who saw an intimate link between America’s long-term well-being and the fate of the world.

**Welfare Reform**

In the aftermath of the Republican sweep in 1994, welfare reform took on fresh urgency. Newly confident conservatives challenged the underlying premises of the welfare system, whose origins stretched back to the New Deal of the 1930s. The critics offered two principal arguments. The first was cost. AFDC, with 14.2 million women and children on its rolls, cost about $125 billion in 1994, including direct payments, food stamps, and Medicaid benefits, a sharp jump since 1989 (see Figure 31.1). Though dwarfed by the benefits that flowed to the middle class through social security, Medicare, farm subsidies, and various tax deductions, this was still a heavy drain on the budget. The second argument for welfare reform was ideological—the belief that the system undermined the work ethic and trapped the poor in a cycle of dependence.

The debate raised serious policy issues and ethical questions. Would cutting welfare penalize children for their parents’ actions? Would the government provide public employment to individuals dropped from the welfare rolls if no private-sector jobs were available? In *The Poverty of Welfare Reform* (1995), historian Joel Handler took a skeptical view. Dismissing the welfare-reform campaign as largely symbolic, he argued that without fundamental changes in the labor market and the political and social climate, changes in welfare policies would mean little: “[F]or the vast majority of mothers and their families, life will go on much as before.”

Nevertheless, politicians of both parties jumped aboard the welfare-reform bandwagon. A broad con-
sensus held that the present system had failed and that welfare should be a short-term bridge to gainful employment, not a lifelong entitlement. Many observers also saw a link between a system that paid higher benefits for each child and the soaring rate of out-of-wedlock births. The debate, therefore, was not over whether change was needed, but what changes. While Clinton favored federally funded child-care, job-training, and work programs to ease the transition from welfare to employment, conservative Republicans believed that the labor market and state and local agencies could best handle these problems. Clinton vetoed two welfare bills that lacked the safeguards he thought essential.

At last, in August 1996, Clinton signed a landmark welfare reform bill. Reversing sixty years of federal welfare policy, the law ended the largest federal program, AFDC. Instead, states were free to develop their own welfare programs with federal block grants while following tough federal rules limiting most welfare recipients to two years of continuous coverage, with a lifetime total of five years. The law also granted states authority to withdraw Medicaid coverage once welfare benefits had been terminated.

Supporters argued that ending welfare as a lifetime entitlement would encourage initiative and personal responsibility. Critics warned of the effects on poor children and on ill-educated welfare mothers in inner cities lacking jobs and social services, and cautioned that the real test of the reform would come in times of recession and high unemployment.

Clinton's approval of a Republican welfare bill disappointed liberals, including Senator Edward Kennedy, and such mainstays of the Democratic coalition as women's groups, minority organizations, and advocacy groups for children and the poor. In the election summer of 1996, still smarting from the repudiation of 1994, Clinton had adjusted to the shifting political winds and moved to the right.

In the short run, the law seemed a success. By December 1998 the welfare rolls had dropped by 38 percent to a thirty-year low of 7.6 million people. The reductions came at a time of economic expansion. How the new system would work when the boom ended, as it did in 2000–2001, remained to be seen.

### Social and Cultural Trends in 1990s America

As the economy expanded through most of the 1990s (see Chapter 32), Americans continued to move to the thriving South and West, and immigrants poured in from Asia and Latin America. Not all Americans prospered. Minorities in the inner cities, including recent immigrants, struggled under harsh conditions to make ends meet. Long-term changes in the economy affected the lives of millions of citizens, benefiting some and creating serious difficulties for others.

U.S. culture of the 1990s reflected the general prosperity, with a heavy emphasis on consumerism, leisure pursuits, and mass-media diversions. But uneasiness
stirred beneath the surface, and the good times did not prevent bitter conflicts over issues of morality and belief.

America in the 1990s: A People in Transition

Historically, U.S. society has been marked by rapid growth, geographic mobility, and ethnic diversity, and—as the 2000 census revealed—this remained true as a new century began. The total population in 2000 stood at more than 281 million, some 33 million more than in 1990, the largest ten-year increase ever. The historic shift of population to the South and West continued, reflecting both internal migration and immigration patterns. The West added 10.4 million residents in the 1990s, with California alone increasing by more than 4 million. Maricopa County, Arizona (which includes Phoenix), grew by nearly 1 million. The South expanded by nearly 15 million people in the decade. Georgia, which outpaced Florida as the most rapidly expanding southern state, grew by more than 26 percent.

The graying of the baby-boom generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) pushed the median age from around 33 in 1990 to 35.3 in 2000, the highest since census records began. The 45 to 54 age group (including most baby boomers), grew by nearly 50 percent in the decade. Government planners braced for pressures on the social-security system and old-age facilities as the baby boomers reached retirement age.

The census also revealed changing living arrangements and family patterns. The proportion of “traditional” nuclear-family households headed by a married couple fell from 74 percent in 1960 to 52 percent in 2000. People living alone made up more than one-quarter of all households, while the proportion of households maintained by unmarried partners continued to increase, reaching 5 percent in 2000. Commenting on the census data, the New York Times observed, “[T]he nuclear family is not the only kind of family or even the only healthy kind of family. In modern America no type of family can really be recognized to the exclusion of all others.”

The overall crime rate fell nearly 20 percent between 1992 and 2000. Experts attributed the decline to a variety of factors, including the decade’s prosperity, stricter gun-control laws, a drop in the young male population, the waning crack-cocaine epidemic, and tougher law enforcement and sentencing rules. The U.S. prison population increased sharply throughout the decade, approaching 2 million by 2000.

Despite the falling crime rate, public fears of crime and violence remained high, fed in part by the appalling annual toll of gun deaths, which exceeded thirty thousand in 1998. Multiple shootings drew special notice. In 1999 an Atlanta man distraught by investment losses shot and killed nine employees at a financial firm. A rash of school shootings proved particularly unsettling. In a particularly horrendous 1999 event, two students at Columbine High School near Denver shot and killed twelve students and a teacher before committing suicide. These episodes produced anxious discussions of America’s obsession with firearms, of a breakdown of parental authority, and of the influence of mass-media violence. In the aftermath of the school massacre in Colorado, President Clinton intensified his campaign for tougher gun-control laws.

Public-health statistics, by contrast, brought encouraging news. Average life expectancy at birth rose from seventy-four to seventy-seven between 1980 and 1999. (Life expectancy differed by gender, race, and other variables, however.) Total health expenditures hit $1.2 trillion in 2000, up 17 percent from 1990. The decline in cigarette smoking by Americans continued, falling to under 25 percent of the population in 2000.

The U.S. AIDS epidemic peaked at last, thanks to safer-sex practices and advances in drug therapies. After cresting in 1995 AIDS deaths and new HIV/AIDS cases both declined thereafter. Health officials warned against complacency: AIDS remained deadly, producing some forty-one thousand new cases in 2000, with African
Americans and Hispanics especially at risk. New (and expensive) drugs slowed the progression from HIV to full-blown AIDS, but no cure had been found. Wrote a gay journalist in 2001, “[Public-health warnings] may have to start anew with gay America as a whole, since some of us weren't around the first time HIV started killing us.”

Globally, the AIDS epidemic raged on, with 22 million deaths and an estimated 36 million HIV/AIDS cases worldwide by 2001. Sub-Saharan Africa, with 25 million cases, was devastated by the disease, and many women and children were among the victims.

The 2000 census underscored the nation’s growing racial and ethnic diversity. The U.S. population at century’s end was about 13 percent Hispanic, 12 percent African American, 4 percent Asian, and 1 percent American Indian (see Figure 31.2). Each of these broad categories, of course, included many subgroups. The Asian category included persons whose origins lay in the Philippines, China and Hong Kong, Vietnam, India, Korea, and elsewhere. The Hispanics (who may be of any race, and are linked by a shared language, Spanish) were nearly 60 percent of Mexican origin, with Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Salvadorans comprising most of the balance. The number of persons with ancestral roots in Haiti (where the languages are Creole and French) increased as well, reaching 385,000 by 2000.

While many Mexicans entered the country legally, others bypassed immigration checkpoints, making dangerous treks across the desert led by guides called “coyotes.” In May 2001 fourteen young Mexicans died of dehydration and exposure when their “coyote” abandoned them in the Arizona desert.

Growing immigration from Asia and Latin America reversed a long decline in the proportion of foreign-born persons in the population. From a low of about 5 percent in 1970, the figure rose steadily, reaching more than 10 percent in 2000. As in earlier immigration cycles, the

![Figure 31.2](image-url)

**Figure 31.2**

**U.S. Population by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2000 and 2050 (Projected)**

By 2050, the Census Bureau projects, the Asian-American population will total some 40 million persons, and the number of Hispanics, at around 90 million, will surpass the number of African-Americans. According to these projections, non-Hispanic whites will constitute less than half the total U.S. population at midcentury.

*Hispanics may be of any race

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
new immigrants mostly settled in cities from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and Seattle on the West Coast to New York City and Miami in the East. In New York, Catholic priests regularly said mass in thirty-five different languages!

**Challenges and Opportunities in a Multiethnic Society**

At century’s end the African-American community continued to present diverse social, educational, and economic characteristics. In a decade of prosperity, many African Americans made significant advances. The black unemployment rate fell from more than 11 percent in 1990 to 6.7 percent in 2000, and the proportion of blacks below the government’s poverty line dropped from 32 percent to under 24 percent.

By 2000, black families’ median income stood at nearly $28,000, a record high, close to that of non-Hispanic white families. The earnings of college-educated blacks was significantly higher, while the number of black-owned businesses, including such giants as TLC Beatrice International, a food company, reached six hundred thousand by mid-decade. Reversing a long trend, some 370,000 blacks moved from North to South in 1990–1995, strengthening the thriving black middle-class and professional communities in Atlanta and other cities. (When recession hit in 2001, some of these encouraging trends slowed or reversed, at least temporarily; see Chapter 32.)

In the inner cities, chronic problems persisted. Movies such as *Boyz ’N the Hood* (1991), set in Los Angeles, portrayed the grim inner-city reality. Drug-related carnage, peaking in the early 1990s, took a fearful toll. In April 1994 James Darby, a black third-grader in New Orleans, wrote to President Clinton as a school assignment, expressing his fear of violence. A week later, walking home from a Mother’s Day picnic, James was shot dead. While the crack-cocaine epidemic diminished, another dangerous hallucinogenic drug called Ecstasy, sold in tablet form at rave clubs and house parties, gained popularity.

In the battle against urban violence, several big cities sued the major gun manufacturers in cases of injury or death caused by unregistered firearms. The manufacturers deliberately overproduced guns, the suits alleged, knowing that many of them would enter the illegal market. In one such suit in 1999, a Brooklyn, New York, jury awarded a victim nearly $4 million.

African Americans, mostly young males convicted of drug-related crimes, comprised 41 percent of prison inmates in 2000. Although the rapid expansion of the prison population slowed as the decade ended, young black males continued to be incarcerated at nearly ten times the rate of young white males. By 2000, one study found, a third of all black men in their twenties were either in prison, on probation, or on parole. Such statistics highlighted the continuing heavy odds facing this vulnerable sector of the African-American community.

Inner-city black women faced risks as well, particularly drug use and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. In 1970 unmarried women had accounted for some 37 percent of all black births; by the 1990s the figure hovered at around 70 percent. Some 30 percent of these births were to teenagers, reducing the young mothers’ opportunities for education and employment and narrowing their children’s prospects. (The out-of-wedlock childbirth rate for white women, while far lower, rose as well.) Whether eliminating automatic benefit increases for each new baby would reduce teen pregnancy in the inner cities, as welfare reformers predicted, remained to be seen, particularly as recession hit and job opportunities diminished.

Among Native Americans, the reassertion of tribal pride and activism continued in the 1990s. Citing Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, which describes all treaties approved by Congress as “the supreme law of the land,” and assisted by groups like the Indian Law Resource Center of Helena, Montana, tribes pursued the enforcement of the 331 Indian treaties ratified between 1778 and 1871. This movement roused antagonism, as non-Indians, including some Western politicians, complained that the treaty-rights movement was going too far.

The growth of Indian-run businesses produced further controversy. In Utah, the tiny Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians, proclaiming themselves an independent nation, offered to lease the valley for nuclear-waste disposal, alarming environmentalists. The Omaha Indians of Nebraska opened a cigarette factory, dismaying public-health advocates.

Indian gambling casinos, approved by Congress in 1988, stirred intense debate. The giant Foxwoods Casino run by the Mashantucket Pequots in Connecticut earned $6 billion annually. As they competed for casino licenses, Indian tribes became major political contributors, pouring $7 million into the 1996 campaign. While the casinos brought needed capital into Indian communities, many citizens deplored the spread of gambling; states battled to extract more tax revenues from the casinos; and some Indians lamented the internal conflicts and erosion of traditional values the casinos brought in their wake.

Despite new sources of income, alcoholism, joblessness, and poor education persisted in Indian communities. The tribes fought back, supporting tribal colleges
and community centers, and using casino earnings to fund alcohol-treatment centers that drew upon such Native American traditions as the sweat lodge and respect for the wisdom of elders.

The Hispanic population, fueled by immigration and high natural increase, grew rapidly in the 1990s. The name most frequently given to male babies in California and Texas in 1999, reported the Social Security Administration, was José. Given a birthrate notably higher than that of either non-Hispanic whites or African Americans, demographers predicted, Hispanics would comprise 25 percent of the population by 2050.

The diverse Hispanic population, too, resisted easy generalizations. While Mexican-Americans concentrated in the Southwest and West Coast, many lived in other regions as well. Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other Hispanic groups, as well as Haitians, resided mainly in Florida, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. Many Hispanics were well educated, prosperous, and upwardly mobile. The median income of Hispanic households rose to more than $30,000 by 2000, and the poverty rate fell. Unemployment among Hispanics dropped from more than 8 percent in 1990 to 5.7 percent in 2000. In the five-year interval between 1993 and 1998, Hispanic-owned business nearly doubled in number, with more than two hundred thousand in Los Angeles County alone. Miami’s Cuban émigré community, with many professionals and benefiting from government aid programs for refugees from communism, was especially prosperous (see A Place in Time: Miami, Florida, 1990s).

As was the case with African-Americans, however, perhaps a quarter of Hispanics lived in inner-city neighborhoods plagued by gangs, addiction, failing schools, and teen pregnancy. Despite the importance of religion and family in Hispanic culture, 25 percent of Hispanic children lived in households with only the mother present in 2000. Ill-educated and unskilled Hispanic newcomers settled in decaying neighborhoods and took the lowest-paid jobs as gardeners, maids, day laborers, and migrant farm workers. Despite the low status of such work, however, the economy depended on it. The British journal *The Economist* wrote in 1998, “Wherever the booming [U.S.] economy cries out for workers, or a place needs regenerating, the ever-arriving and ever-progressing Latinos will move in. Nothing daunts them.”

Hispanics, like other immigrant groups, mobilized to address problems, lobby politically, and campaign for community betterment. The largest advocacy group, La Raza, worked to promote Hispanic interests. By the early 1990s, in California alone, more than four thousand Hispanics held public office.

One thing was clear: the burgeoning Hispanic population was changing America. In June 2001 *Time* magazine devoted a special issue to what it called “Amexica,” a Southwestern border region of 24 million people, growing at double the national rate. “The border is vanishing before our eyes,” declared *Time*, creating a new nation within a nation “where hearts and minds and money and culture merge.” *Time* focused on the paired U.S. and Mexican cities dotting this border: from Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, near the Gulf of Mexico, westward to San Diego and Tijuana on the Pacific. This vast region, the magazine argued, was spawning a vibrant new borderlands culture; new trade and economic ties; and also social problems, including communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, illegal immigration, and drug trafficking.

Asian newcomers also presented a highly variegated picture. Prizing education, supported by
close family networks, and often possessing needed skills and entrepreneurial talent, many Asian immigrants moved rapidly up the economic ladder. After passage of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, for example, Indian doctors, engineers, and academics emigrated to America in large numbers, often joined later by aging parents and other family members, for a total of some 1.7 million by 2000.

Chinese and other Asian immigrant groups often followed a similar pattern of assimilation and upward mobility. In Fremont, California, near San Francisco, the Asian population increased from 19 percent in 1990 to 37 percent in 2000. Many of the newcomers worked as engineers and businesspeople in nearby Silicon Valley. At Fremont’s Mission San José High School, the enrollment was 61 percent Asian; a visitor in 2001 found walls plastered with such signs as “Amanda Chan for Class Treasurer” and “Sadaf Gowani for Secretary.” The Hmong, a Laotian mountain people who had supported the United States in the Vietnam War, formed a distinct Asian immigrant group. Settling mainly in Wisconsin and Minnesota, their numbers reached about one hundred thousand by 2000. On campuses and in city neighborhoods, Asian-Americans organized to promote their interests, sometimes acting collectively and sometimes in specific national groups.

Rethinking Citizenship in an Era of Diversity

By 2050, demographers calculate, no single racial or ethnic group will be a majority in America. Non-Hispanic whites, in other words, while still a plurality, will simply be another ingredient in the ethnic mix. In a parallel development, many Americans of mixed racial and ethnic origins, like the golfer Tiger Woods, resisted being pigeonholed. The number of interracial married couples in the United States rose tenfold in the years 1960–2000, from 149,000 to 1.5 million. Recognizing these realities, in 2000 the Census Bureau permitted citizens to check more than one racial category.

Many Americans found the new diversity exhilarating and full of promise, but others did not, and the phenomenon of “white flight” continued. As immigrants arrived in the cities, native-born whites tended to move out. Between 1990 and 1995 both Los Angeles and New York lost more than 1 million native-born inhabitants, approximately equal to the new arrivals from Asia and Latin America. Cities such as Las Vegas, Phoenix, Portland, Denver, and Austin attracted non-Hispanic whites departing from larger metropolitan centers with growing immigrant populations.

Amid these swirling demographic changes, what did it mean to be an “American” in a multiethnic, multicultural society? What would bind together such a diverse population? Some observers feared that Americans, at least emotionally and psychologically, would divide into separate camps based on ethnicity, religion, national origin, or skin color. The pressures in this direction seemed strong. At the UCLA law school, for example, blacks, Latinos, and Asians had their own student associations and their own law reviews. Newt Gingrich in 1995 gloomily foresaw “a civilization in danger of simply falling apart.”

While counterrtrends toward a more cosmopolitan culture could be seen, particularly among the professional classes, racial and ethnic loyalties remained strong. This was hardly surprising as long as income and opportunity remained linked to race and ethnicity. Nor was it surprising that Americans disturbed by the anonymity of modern mass society should seek the reassurance of a clear-cut group identity, whether of blood, geography, ancestry, or faith.

Language became a major battleground. While some Anglo politicians campaigned to make English America’s “official language,” advocates for various immigrant groups called for school instruction in children’s native tongue, or at least bilingual classes. However, a 1998 study of immigrant children found that they overwhelmingly wished to learn and speak English in school.

In his 1908 play The Melting Pot, Israel Zangwill, a Jewish immigrant from England, foresaw the blending of different immigrant groups into a common national identity. By the century’s end, the “melting pot” metaphor had faded, in part because its advocates had usually assumed that as immigrants entered the “melting pot” they would abandon their ethnic roots and cultural traditions and conform to a standard “American” model.

If there was to be no “melting pot,” what would unite this diverse society? Americans shared a common identity as consumers of goods and as participants in the mass culture of movies, TV, theme parks, and professional sports. Was this enough? Could the nation’s civic culture match its commercial and leisure culture? This question, first posed by social thinkers of the 1920s, remained unresolved at the dawning of a new century.

The “New Economy”

In 1973 sociologist Daniel Bell published a book called The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social
In the 1990s America’s changing ethnic profile was nowhere better illustrated than in Miami, whose sun-drenched beaches, flamboyant skyscrapers, and pastel-tinted Art Deco buildings all proclaim its status as the nation’s southernmost major city. Spain, having subdued the local Calusas Indians, claimed the region until 1819, when the Adams-Onís Treaty ceded title to the United States. Florida entered the Union in 1845, but sporadic Indian resistance—the so-called Seminole Wars—persisted into the 1850s. (A small tribe of Native Americans, the Miccosukee, lives on a nearby reservation.)

A 1920s land boom collapsed in the wake of a killer hurricane, but Miami burgeoned after World War II as GIs who had trained in the area returned. Miami Beach proved especially popular with Jewish retirees from New York. The novelist I. B. Singer, recalling his first visit in 1948, wrote, “Miami Beach resembled a small Israel. . . . Yiddish resounded around us in accents as thick as those you would hear in Tel Aviv.”

Today’s Miami is more Havana than Tel Aviv. In 2000, 57 percent of the 2.3 million residents of Miami-Dade County were Hispanic, and most of them were Cuban-Americans. Cubans fled their island country en masse after Fidel Castro seized power in 1959; by 1973 three hundred thousand had settled in Greater Miami. Thousands more, the so-called Mariel boat people who left with Castro’s approval, arrived in 1980.

Far from being a struggling minority, Cuban-Americans compose a confident, fully developed ethnic community. They influence not only Miami’s cultural ambience but also its political and economic agenda. Cuban-born Xavier Saurez became mayor in 1985. “Little Havana,” the sprawling downtown district centered on Calle Ocho (Eighth Street), boasts not only churches, restaurants, and shops but also banks, medical centers, law offices, insurance companies, and construction firms employing professionals of all kinds.

This community’s political clout was displayed in November 1999 when two fishermen rescued six-year-old Elian Gonzales, who was floating in an inner tube off Key Biscayne, Florida. Elian was one of three survivors of a boatload of Cubans, including his mother, who were lost at sea when attempting to reach Florida. Miami’s Cuban-Americans rallied around the boy, and for months the story dominated the media. Parades, demonstrations, banners, and Elian T-shirts were mobilized in a campaign to keep him in the United States. (One person wearied by the media saturation launched an Internet website called “The Elian Gonzales Channel—All Elian all the Time,” with parody headlines such as “Elian Gains One Pound. Experts Blame McDonalds.”) Stories circulated of dolphins that had miraculously watched over the boy during his watery ordeal. Finally, in June 2000, federal officers, enforcing a court order, removed Elian from his Miami relatives and returned him to his father in Cuba.
Jamaicans and other Hispanic groups also call Miami home. The 1980s brought emigrants from troubled Nicaragua, El Salvador, and especially Haiti. Although U.S. immigration officials intercept and repatriate Haitian refugees arriving by sea, this community continues to grow.

Miami’s black community, making up some 20 percent of the population, is centered in Liberty City, Richmond Heights, and other enclaves. While Richmond Heights is middle class and well-to-do, overall the black population ranks among the city’s poorest. Relations between African Americans and Hispanics are strained. While many native-born blacks feel alienated and exploited, Hispanic newcomers tend to view the United States more positively. African Americans generally vote Democratic, the Cuban-Americans are mostly conservative Republicans.

Ethnic diversity generates a distinctive Miami style. Jewish delis coexist with Hispanic restaurants. Snapper, paella, conch fritters, stone crabs, Haitian curried goat, potent Cuban coffee, and an array of salsas tempt local palates. In prosperous times, ethnic lines blur in a shared pursuit of the good life. A recession in the 1970s drove the jobless rate to 13 percent, but the economy bounced back in the 1980s and 1990s. The city’s love of sports finds many outlets: sailing, windsurfing, sports car rallies, horseracing at Hialeah, and avid support for the Miami Dolphins football team, the Miami Heat basketball team, and the University of Miami Hurricanes.

With its round of parades, fairs, and festivals, the city seems dedicated to the pleasure principle. Casual dress and gold jewelry set the tone for both sexes. The beaches encourage what some call Miami’s “body culture.” Fashion photography is big business. Journalist Patrick May sums up the city this way: “Non-stop entertainment. Over a stage backdropped by fruit salad sunsets and palm tree props, the curtain for 100 years has risen faithfully each dawn. And there it stands, tongue firmly in cheek, hogging the spotlight. The show-off of American cities admiring itself in a full-length mirror.”

Behind the façade lie problems. Racial tensions simmer near the surface. Black neighborhoods erupted in violence in 1968 and again in 1980 when a jury acquitted a white police officer in a black man’s death. As the Hispanic population has grown, non-Hispanic whites have moved out. Civic leaders bemoan “Anglo flight,” and some non-Hispanics flaunt hostile bumper stickers that proclaim, “Will the last American leaving Miami please bring the flag?”

With Spanish the predominant native tongue, language is contested terrain. In many neighborhoods English is rarely heard or seen. Other languages thrive as well. In 1994 a reporter observed a Vietnamese, a Spanish-speaking Colombian, and a French-speaking Haitian vainly trying to communicate at an auto-repair shop. (They eventually diagnosed the problem: a faulty distributor.) In 1980 the Miami-Dade County commissioners proclaimed English the official language for government business. But many Miamians continue to conduct their daily lives without resort to English.

Miami’s links with organized crime go far back. Rum-running and gambling proliferated in the 1920s. Mobster Al Capone retired here in the 1930s. Today, a thriving wholesale drug traffic drives up the crime statistics. Fast boats smuggle in cocaine from “mother ships” hovering offshore; commercial aircraft arriving from South America unwittingly transmit drugs. Miami-Dade County’s 1981 homicide toll of 621 earned it the dubious title “Murder Capital USA.” A popular TV show of 1984–1989, Miami Vice, glamorized the city’s underside along with its tropical setting, laid-back fashions, and stage-set architecture. While drug wars and domestic disputes account for most of the bloodshed, the killing of several tourists during robbery attempts tarnished the city’s appeal in the early 1990s. “Miami wears its crime like cheap perfume,” observes a guidebook half boastfully; “it’s hard to ignore.”

Decades of development have taken a heavy toll on fragile wetlands and unspoiled wilderness areas. The nearby Everglades, once spread over 4 million acres, has dwindled to one-tenth its former size. Of the exotic wildlife that formerly inhabited this fragile ecosystem, only a fraction survives.

Crime, ethnic tensions, environmental degradation, cultural diversity, hedonistic pleasure seeking—for better or worse, Miami has it all. In this vibrant, garish, future-oriented city, the demographic changes as well as the social problems that characterize contemporary America emerge in particularly stark fashion.
Forecasting. Unlike many such works, Bell’s proved remarkably accurate. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, America’s farm-based economy had given way to an economy based on factory production and manual labor in cities. As the twentieth century ended, a second major transformation was again reshaping the U.S. economy: the decline of the industrial sector and the rise of a service-based economy (see Figure 31.3). Manufacturing continued, of course, but it faded as a major source of employment. In 1960 about half of the male labor force worked in industry or in related jobs such as truck driving. By the late 1990s this figure had fallen to under 40 percent.

In the same period, the percentage of professional, technical, and service workers continued its century-long upward trend. In 1960 such workers had comprised about 42 percent of the male labor force; by 1998 the figure was 58 percent. The percentage of women workers in the service sector was even higher.

The service economy was highly segmented. At one end were low-paying jobs in fast-food outlets, video rental stores, nursing homes, and chain stores such as Wal-Mart. At the other end were lawyers and physicians; money managers and accountants; and workers in the entertainment and telecommunications fields. The latter category expanded rapidly with the growth of high-speed telecommunications systems and the rise of the personal computer with its Internet-based spinoffs (see Technology and Culture: The Personal Computer in Chapter 30).

This sector of the service economy helped give the economic boom of the later 1990s its aura of sizzle and excitement (see below). As the Web-based Encyclopedia of the New Economy proclaimed somewhat breathlessly,

When we talk about the new economy, we’re talking about a world in which people work with their brains instead of their hands. . . . A world in which innovation is more important than mass production. A world in which investment buys new concepts . . . rather than new machines. A world in which rapid change is a constant.
The decline of the industrial economy and the rise of the service economy had different meanings for different groups. Young people with the education, skills, and contacts to enter the new high-tech industries often found exciting challenges and substantial economic rewards. For less-privileged youths, supermarkets, fast-food outlets, or discount superstores could provide entry-level work, but doubtful job security and long-term career prospects. For older workers displaced from industrial jobs, the impact could be devastating both economically and emotionally. Whatever their position in society, few Americans were unaffected by the rise of the new economy with all its implications for social change.

**Affluence, Conspicuous Consumption, a Search for Heroes**

The economic boom that began in 1992 and roared through the Clinton years produced instant fortunes for some and an orgy of consumption that set the tone of the decade. Wall Street and Silicon Valley spawned thousands of twenty-something millionaires. In 1997, surveying the ostentatious lifestyles of young investment geniuses, most of whom had never experienced anything but rising stock prices, *Vanity Fair* magazine described New York as “the champagne city, making the brash consumption of the 1980s look like the depression.” Tales circulated of elegant restaurants offering obscenely expensive cigars and rare wines, and exclusive shops selling $13,000 handbags. In 1999, as the good times rolled on, the nation’s top one hundred advertisers spent $43 billion promoting their goods.

The economic boom also encouraged what some considered a smug, hard-edged “winner take all” mentality like that of the Gilded Age, when those at the top turned their backs on the larger society. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), political scientist Robert Putnam sharply criticized American public life. Putnam found diminished civic engagement and weakened interest in public issues, as evidenced by declines in voter participation, political activism, and participation in civic organizations. He even found less informal socializing, from dinner with friends to card parties and bowling leagues, as Americans pursued purely personal goals. While some saw the Internet as a new form of community, Putnam viewed it as further evidence of the privatization of life and the erosion of the public sphere.

Anecdotal evidence supported Putnam’s conclusions. A 1997 survey of college students found that 77 percent expected to become millionaires. A motivational book called *The Prayer of Jabez*, which became a bestseller in 2000, cited a biblical prayer by a shepherd recorded in I Chronicles (“Bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory”) as a key to success. Wrote the author, the Reverend Bruce Wilkinson, “If Jabez had worked on Wall Street, he might have prayed ‘Lord, increase the value of my investment portfolio.’

With the stock market surging, the Cold War over, and other threats only beginning to come into focus, many Americans set out to enjoy themselves. Attendance at the Disney theme parks in Florida and California neared 30 million in 2000. The sales of massive sport-utility vehicles (SUVs) soared, despite environmentalists’ laments about their fuel inefficiency. When a White House press secretary was asked in the summer of 2001 if Americans should change their consumption patterns to conserve energy, he replied, “[i]t should be the goal of policy makers to protect the American way of life—the American way of life is a blessed one.”


Millions avidly followed TV coverage of the 1995 trial of O. J. Simpson, a former football star accused of murdering his estranged wife and her friend. The 1996 murder of a six-year-old Colorado girl whose parents had pushed her into child beauty pageants similarly mesmerized the public. So did the 2001 disappearance of a young federal-government intern from California after an alleged affair with her congressman. (In 2002 the congressman was defeated for reelection, and the young woman’s body was found in a remote section of a Washington park.) The sex scandals that swirled around President Clinton and ultimately led to his impeachment (see Chapter 32) often seemed to be no more than another media diversion in a sensation-hungry decade.

Again, as was true of the 1980s, other evidence from the popular culture suggests a more complex picture. Some critics interpreted *Titanic*, which sided with its working-class hero in steerage against the rich snobs in first class, as a subtle comment on a decade when class differences in America were blatantly on display. One
even called the movie “an exercise in class hatred.” American Beauty (1999) explored dark and murderous currents beneath the façade of a comfortable suburban family.

The Clint Eastwood western Unforgiven, winner of the 1992 Academy Award for best picture, seemed to express nostalgia for an earlier era when life presented rugged challenges and hard moral choices. The same longings, some suggested, underlay the outpouring of admiring biographies of larger-than-life heroes from the past, such as Stephen Ambrose’s Eisenhower (1991), A. Scott Berg’s Lindbergh (1999), and David McCullough’s Truman (1993) and John Adams (2001).

The decade also reveled in the heroic era of World War II, featuring it in a series of TV specials, books such as Ambrose’s Citizen Soldiers (1997) and Tom Brokaw’s The Greatest Generation (1998), and movies like Saving Private Ryan (1998) and Pearl Harbor (2001). Commenting on the latter film, New York Times columnist Frank Rich observed,

Pearl Harbor is more about the present than the past. . . . The motivation, in part, is overcompensation . . . for what is missing in our national life: some cause larger than ourselves, whatever it might be. . . . Even those Americans who are . . . foggy about World War II . . . know intuitively that it was fought over something more blessed than the right to guzzle gas.

A Truce in the Culture Wars?

Elsewhere on the cultural landscape, the 1990s also saw a continuation of the moralistic battles that had begun in the 1970s, which some viewed as nothing less than a struggle for the nation’s soul. The Christian Coalition’s attempted takeover of the Republican party was only part of a larger campaign to reverse what conservatives saw as America’s moral decay. In earlier times, the culture wars had raged along sectarian lines, with native-born Protestants battling Catholic and Jewish immigrants. During the Cold War, the source of evil had been clear: the global communist conspiracy, centered in Moscow. Now many Americans translated the same apocalyptic world view to the home front, and searched for the enemy within.

Some viewed the sexual revolution as the great threat. As gays and lesbians grew more vocal politically (and increasingly visible in the popular culture and in TV programming), a rash of state-level efforts sought to counter their demands for equality. In 1998, amid this climate of reaction, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, Matthew Shepard, was tortured and murdered by two local youths because of his sexual orientation.

As the abortion controversy continued, a small number of “pro-life” advocates turned from peaceful protest to violence. In 1995 an anti-abortion activist fatally shot a physician and his bodyguard outside a Florida abortion clinic, and an unstable young man murdered two people and wounded five others at a clinic near Boston. In 1997 bombers struck abortion clinics in Tulsa and Atlanta. The following year, a Buffalo, New York, physician who performed abortions was shot dead. (In part because of such terror tactics, the abortion rate dropped by some 12 percent between 1992 and 1996.)

On April 19, 1995, in the worst outburst of domestic terrorism up to that time, a bomb demolished an Oklahoma City federal building, killing 168 people. The bomber struck precisely two years after a government raid on the Waco, Texas, compound of the Branch Davidians, an apocalyptic religious sect charged with firearms violations. The 1993 Waco raid ended tragically when fires burst out inside the main building as federal tanks moved in, leaving some eighty Branch Davidians dead. After the Oklahoma City blast, the authorities soon arrested Timothy McVeigh, a Gulf War veteran outraged by the Waco incident. McVeigh and his co-conspirator, Terry Nichols, had vague links to the secretive right-wing militia movement that sprang up in the 1990s. These organizations were often obsessed with conspiracy theories and deeply suspicious of the gov-
McVeigh, convicted of murder, was executed by lethal injection in June 2001. Nichols received a life sentence.

Adding to the national jitters over violence-prone loners and shadowy antigovernment groups was a series of bombs mailed between 1978 and 1995 to individuals whose business or professional activities could be interpreted as anti-environmental. The bombs killed three people and injured twenty-eight others. In 1996 authorities arrested Theodore Kaczynski, a Harvard-trained mathematician and obsessive opponent of modern technology, in his remote Montana cabin. Kaczynski was convicted but escaped the death penalty by reason of mental incapacity.

The culture wars were fought mainly with words and symbolic gestures, not bullets and bombs. In 1995 the Smithsonian Institution cancelled an exhibit marking the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan when veterans' organizations and some politicians attacked it for allegedly overemphasizing the bombs' human toll and for presenting historians' differing views of Truman's decision.

The struggle unfolded on many fronts, from televangelists' programs and radio talk shows to school-board protests and boycotts of TV shows deemed morally offensive. Conservatives attacked history textbooks for promoting "multiculturalism," for being insufficiently patriotic, and for pandering to the forces of "political correctness." The cultural measures undertaken by Congress after the 1994 Republican landslide, discussed earlier, were a part of this larger drive to purge American life of the evils that religious and cultural conservatives saw on every hand.

Religious conservatives proposed a constitutional amendment permitting prayer in classrooms and called for a renewal of traditional morality and "family values." The rapidly growing evangelical and charismatic churches continued to denounce society's wickedness and the government's role in the moral decline. In October 1997 some seven hundred thousand men belonging to a conservative Protestant religious movement called Promise Keepers rallied in Washington, D.C., for a day of prayer, hymn singing, and pledges to reclaim the moral and spiritual leadership of their households.

Pat Robertson's The New World Order (1991) saw much of U.S. and indeed world history as a vast conspiracy that would soon end in the rule of the Antichrist. As the year 2000 neared, popularizers of Bible prophecy intensified their warnings that history's final crisis was at hand. (Widespread fears of massive computer failures associated with "Y2K," the shorthand term for the coming of the year 2000, added to the apprehension.) The charges of infidelity levied against President Clinton underscored for conservatives the moral rot they saw eating away at America.

As the 1990s ended, the cultural wars seemed to diminish. The Christian Coalition lost momentum when its politically savvy director, Ralph Reed, resigned in 1997. By 1998 leaders of the Christian Coalition and other groups were expressing open frustration with Republican politicians who courted conservative Christians' votes but failed to fight for their cultural agenda once in power. In One Nation After All (1998), sociologist Alan Wolfe reported on his interviews with middle-class Americans, whom he found suspicious of extremist positions and broadly accepting of diversity. The virtues of tolerance and live-and-let-live, Wolfe suggested, were thriving in middle America. One of Wolfe's interviewees reflected, "I wish more people would recognize [that] we can't just stand back and whine about the ways things are and... about how terrible the changes will be. We've got to move forward and trust that we can... get to a solution eventually." In its optimism and moderate tone, such a perspective captured a deep-seated American pragmatic approach to social problems, and struck an encouraging note as a new century dawned.
CONCLUSION

Both America and the world changed profoundly in the 1990s. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union radically upset the familiar world order, posing major challenges for Reagan’s successor, George Bush. Bush successfully met the first post-Cold War international crisis, mobilizing an international coalition to repel Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, but his domestic record proved less impressive. In 1992, having broken a promise not to raise taxes, and with America in recession, Bush lost to the Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton, who heavily emphasized the theme of economic recovery in his campaign.

In choosing Clinton, the nation elected a highly intelligent politician with a mastery of policy issues and an easy empathy (“I feel your pain” was a phrase he liked to use), but with character flaws that continually threatened to overshadow his strengths. Clinton’s ambitious plan for a major restructuring of the health-care system became bogged down in Congress and ultimately died. This failure, coupled with other missteps, laid the groundwork for a Republican landslide in the 1994 midterm election.

A rebounding economy erased the federal budget deficits and gave the 1990s a glow of prosperity. The good times were unevenly distributed, however, and left the problems of the inner cities unresolved. Along with day-to-day events, the history of the period was also shaped by long-term social and economic trends. A continuing population shift southward and westward, coupled with high levels of immigration from Latin America and Asia, affected the politics of the decade and gave the nation an ever more multiethnic and multicultural flavor. At the same time, new information technologies, including the rise of the personal computer, contributed to a fundamental economic restructuring marked by the decline of the old factory-based economy and the growth of a new knowledge-based service economy.

Culturally, Americans who prospered in these boom years continued their 1980s’ preoccupation with consumer goods and escapist diversions. Cultural conservatives, however, grew increasingly vocal, hammering on such emotional issues as abortion, homosexuality, and the nation’s alleged moral decay. The culture wars seemed to ease as the decade ended, and Americans looked to the new century with confidence.

Chronology, 1988-1995

1986 William Rehnquist becomes chief justice of the United States.
Antonin Scalia joins Supreme Court.
1988 George Bush elected president.
Anthony Kennedy joins Supreme Court.
1989 Massive Alaskan oil spill by Exxon Valdez.
Supreme Court, in several 5 to 4 decisions, restricts civil-rights laws.
U.S. invasion of Panama; Manuel Noriega overthrown.
China’s rulers crush pro-democracy movement.
Berlin Wall is opened.
1990 Federal Clean Air Act strengthened.
Americans with Disabilities Act passed.
President Bush and Congress agree on five-year budget-deficit reduction package.
Iraq invades Kuwait.
Recession begins.
Germany reunified; Soviet troops start withdrawal from Eastern Europe.
David H. Souter joins Supreme Court.
1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm).
Clarence Thomas seated on Supreme Court.
1992 Supreme Court approves Pennsylvania restriction on abortion but upholds Roe v. Wade.
Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton elected president.
1993 Congress enacts modified version of Clinton economic plan.
Congress approves NAFTA treaty.
Ruth Bader Ginsberg joins Supreme Court.
Federal forces raid Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas.
1994 Christian Coalition gains control of Republican party in several states.
Stephen G. Breyer joins Supreme Court.
Republican candidates proclaim “Contract with America.”
Republican victory in 1994 elections; Newt Gingrich becomes Speaker of the House.
1995 AIDS epidemic peaks in the United States; continues worldwide.
Oklahoma City federal building bombed.
1996 Welfare Reform Act passed.
1999 Columbine High School shootings
2000 Federal census finds population surge in West and South, sharp increases in Hispanic and Asian population, and changing family patterns.
On the political front, despite the rocky start of the Clinton presidency, the sustained economic boom worked in the Democrats’ favor, and Clinton easily won a second term in 1996. The years beyond 1996, however, would severely test the mood of confidence, bringing political scandal; recession; and, early in the new century, the most horrendous act of terrorism the nation had ever experienced.

For Further Reference

Readings


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Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War (1994). A historian and a journalist-turned-diplomat collaborate on an early but valuable account of the Cold War’s demise.


David Maraniss First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton (1995) Explores the sources of Clinton’s political drive and his almost desperate need to be liked.


Alan Wolfe, One Nation After All: What Middle Class Americans Really Think . . . (1998). A sociologist reports on his extensive firsthand interviews, and finds reason for optimism about middle-class attitudes on a variety of issues.

Websites

The Berlin Wall
http://userpage.chemie.fu-berlin.de/BW/wall.html
This extensive website, by a Berliner, includes a historical narrative; firsthand accounts; stories, photographs and art relating to the Wall; and links to many specific topics.

Hmong Home Page
http://hmongnet.org/
Interesting home page maintained by Hmong immigrants, with history, news, and current events.

The Internet Public Library, POTUS, Presidents of the United States, George Herbert Walker Bush
http://www.ipl.org/ref/POTUS/ghwbush.html
Factual information about Bush and his administration, with links to election results, specific events, historical documents, and audio sites.

The Internet Public Library, POTUS, Presidents of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton
http://www.ipl.org/ref/POTUS/wjclinton.html
Basic biographical information, with many links to election results, cabinet members, historical documents, notable events, and audio sources.

PBS Frontline Program, The Gulf War
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/
Maps, chronology, tapes and transcripts of oral-history interviews with participants. Also includes a four-hour BBC-Radio special on the Gulf War.

Time Magazine Webpage on the U.S.-Mexican Border Region
http://www.aola.com/newfrontier
This site, based the Time special issue of June 11, 2001, includes an interactive map of the U.S.-Mexican border region, video and audio clips, and other resources.

U.S. Bureau of the Census Home Page
http://www.census.gov
This site includes a wealth of information about the U.S. population.

Wired Digital, Inc., a Lycos Network site, Encyclopedia of the New Economy
http://hotwired.lycos.com/special/ene/
This fascinating website contains dozens of short, readable essays on a wide range of topics relating to the economic changes of the 1990s and beyond.

For additional readings please consult the bibliography at the end of the book.