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Time Period 9: 1980-Present

As the United States transitioned to a new century filled with challenges and possibilities, it experienced renewed ideological and cultural debates, sought to redefine its foreign policy, and adapted to economic globalization and revolutionary changes in science and technology.

Key Concept 9.1: A newly ascendant conservative movement achieved several political and policy goals during the 1980s and continued to strongly influence public discourse in the following decades.

Key Concept 9.2: Moving into the 21st century, the nation experienced significant technological, economic, and demographic changes.

Key Concept 9.3: The end of the Cold War and new challenges to U.S. leadership forced the nation to redefine its foreign policy and role in the world.

1945 to the Present



President-elect Barack Obama is welcomed by President George W. Bush for a meeting at the White House with former presidents, from left, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter. (Courtesy of the White House)

No event proved more important to the course of modern American history than World War II. The war cast America onto the world stage as a mighty economic and military giant. It rescued the country from the Great Depression, created full employment, and for the first time in a generation increased real income for American workers. Moreover, the poorest 40 percent of the population saw its share of the national income grow, while the top 5 percent witnessed a decline. Technology boomed, and the computer age began. African Americans and women

experienced more dramatic change than they had in decades. And the contours of postwar diplomacy took shape in response to issues dividing the Western Allies on the one hand from the Soviet Union on the other. Although the war lasted only four years for the United States, its impact endured for generations.

Domestically, the war triggered massive social changes. More than 6.5 million women took jobs for the first time, increasing the female labor force by 57 percent. Most were married and over 35. Whereas before the war, the average woman worker was young, single, and poor, by the end of the war she was married, middle aged, and increasingly middle class. African Americans joined the Armed Forces in record numbers, while two million left the South for factory jobs in the North and West. While facing ongoing discrimination, black Americans pursued the “Double V” campaign—victory against racism at home as well as victory against fascism abroad. Membership in the NAACP—the largest African American protest organization—skyrocketed from 50,000 to 500,000.

In the meantime, workers with rising incomes put their money into savings accounts, since rationing limited their ability to purchase consumer goods like cars and clothes. Those funds were then available to fuel the consumer boom that followed the war. Millions took advantage of the opportunities to buy new houses in the suburbs, shop for new cars and appliances, and join the burgeoning “affluent society” of the 1950s.

The war also set the stage for the dominant political and diplomatic reality of the postwar years—the Cold War. Tensions among the Allies had existed from the beginning of World War II, and after the war profound conflicts continued to separate the superpowers. What would be the fate of Poland, whose freedom was the reason for Allied intervention in the first place? How would Germany and Japan be governed after the war? What about other Eastern European countries like Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary? Should they fall under Soviet control, or have Western-style free governments? And how about the atomic bomb? Should the United States try to be the sole nuclear power, or should it share information about atomic science?

Although Roosevelt was confident he could reconcile these tensions, he died before the war ended, and he never shared his ideas for making peace. His successor, Harry Truman, found himself in an increasingly hostile relationship with Stalin and the USSR. By 1947, polarization between the two superpowers had come to dominate all diplomatic relations. In the Truman Doctrine, the President portrayed America as being in a holy war with Soviet Union. It was a battle between good and evil, he said, with God-fearing people who believed in freedom on one side, and atheistic Communists who believed in tyranny on the other. In this worldview, there could be no room for compromise, and anyone who suggested such a course was immoral.

Pursuing a policy of “containment,” the United States pledged to fight Communist incursions any place and any time they occurred.

Tensions worsened through the 1940s and 1950s as nations around the world aligned themselves on one side or the other. The United States created the Marshall Plan in 1948 to rebuild Europe and established NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance) the same year. In 1949, the USSR tested its first atomic bomb, and Communist China led by Mao Zedong emerged. In 1950, North Korea—with Russia’s approval—invaded South Korea, precipitating an immediate American response. The Korean War was the first open military conflagration of the Cold War. And in 1955, when NATO accepted the Federal Republic of Germany as a member, Russia formed the Warsaw Pact to prevent future invasions of Soviet territory and tighten control over Eastern Europe.

But Cold War anti-communism was not limited to foreign policy. The “other side of the [Cold War] walnut” was domestic anti-communism. From the hearings of the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC) in the immediate postwar years to the launching of McCarthyism in 1950, fear of domestic communism dominated political discourse at home. It was the primary weapon in President Truman’s re-election campaign in 1948. Threatened by the candidacy of former Vice President Henry Wallace on the Progressive Party ticket, Truman denounced “Wallace and *his communists*” (emphasis added), suggesting that anyone to the left of the Democratic Party mainstream was suspect. When Truman proposed national health care insurance to Congress in 1947, it was excoriated as “socialized medicine,” an effort to imitate the Soviet Union. The same allegation was made against day care centers in New York City, because such centers suggested that the state take over the responsibilities of the family, as in the Soviet Union. Those who supported such measures were denounced as “fellow travelers” and “communist sympathizers.”

As a result, a centrist consensus emerged as the dominant political style of America. Democrats and Republicans celebrated American democracy and capitalism; they agreed there were no fundamental problems with American society, and that any problems that did exist could be solved by incremental reform. Economic growth would serve as the primary means of securing social progress. The anchor of this consensus was anti-communism, both as a foreign policy toward the Soviet Union and as a political stance rejecting the kind of left-of-center politics that was prevalent in the Labor Party in England and the Social Democratic Parties of France and Germany. To be sure, Democrats and Republicans disagreed on many issues, but for the most part both parties occupied the center of the political spectrum.

Thus, Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican and a war hero, was elected president in 1952, but he never sought to undo the New Deal. Indeed, he created a Cabinet-level Department of Health, Education and Welfare and famously wrote his brother that

anyone who contemplated ending Social Security must be out of his mind. Similarly, when John F. Kennedy was elected president, he focused primarily on the Cold War and on stimulating economic growth. He might have been a Democrat, but in substance, Kennedy represented continuity with, not difference from, President Eisenhower.

In spite of this political consensus, the Civil Rights Movement was able to surge forward in the postwar years, creating the foundation for a decade of rapidly expanding protest. When black veterans returned from World War II, they refused to accept second-class citizenship any longer. With their uniforms still on, they went to register to vote. When they were beaten—even murdered—for trying to exercise the franchise, they fought back. The war had kindled a new activism and a new faith among African Americans. What had previously been endured was vigorously resisted, from the bottom up. When a black woman was raped by six white police officers in Montgomery, Alabama, angry African Americans, led by a Women's Political Council and a black labor union, insisted that the police be put on trial. One of those activists was Rosa Parks. Secretary of the local NAACP, she was determined to challenge racism wherever it existed. So when she was told to give up her seat on a public bus to a white person in December 1955, she refused. Her arrest sparked phone conversations between the Women's Political Council and the black labor union, and the next night, the African American community poured into a Baptist church where they heard a young and unknown minister, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., implore the community to stand up for justice. For 381 days, not a single black person in Montgomery rode a public bus, until finally the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public transportation was unconstitutional.

By the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had become a page-one story in every newspaper and had entered the political arena as a pivotal issue. On February 1, 1960, four first-year college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, "sat in" at the local Woolworth's to demand the right to buy a cup of coffee at the lunch counter, just as they were able to purchase school supplies and toiletries at other counters. They started a flash fire of similar protests. Within two months, sit-ins had spread to fifty-four cities in nine different states, and in the North students, black and white, protested stores that practiced segregation in the South. Soon, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was created, and civil rights demonstrators sought to integrate public restaurants and hotels and register voters in every Southern state.

By 1963, President John F. Kennedy could no longer ignore what was happening around the country and went on national television to declare that racial equality was a "moral issue" as old as the Scriptures and to propose legislation that would end segregation in the work place and in all public accommodations. Five months later on November 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated. He did not live to see his

legislation pass, but his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, not only secured passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but also signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, prohibiting the states from denying African Americans their right to vote in the South. The greatest reform president since Franklin Roosevelt, Johnson also waged a War on Poverty, secured passage of Medicare, which offered health insurance to senior citizens, and promoted far-reaching changes in federal aid for education, manpower retraining, and urban renewal.

As in the abolition movement more than one hundred years earlier, the battle over equal rights for African Americans quickly led to a battle over equal rights for women. Throughout the 1950s, women's employment rate increased four times faster than men's. Although most of those jobs were underpaid and not competitive with men's jobs, they contradicted the dictum that "a woman's place is in the home." Soon, that cultural norm came under overt attack. President Kennedy established the Commission on the Status of Women, which in 1963 called for reforms in women's status. The 1964 Civil Rights Act specifically outlawed discrimination in the workplace against women as well as African Americans, and when there was little effort to enforce that prohibition, a group of activists led by Betty Friedan created the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Friedan had written the best-selling *Feminine Mystique* in 1963, revealing the dissatisfaction of middle-class housewives who were concerned with "the problem that has no name." It was given a name—sexism—and NOW set out to integrate women into the mainstream of American society, just as the NAACP had done for black Americans.

Young woman activists in the Civil Rights Movement, in the meantime, realized that they were treated as "second-class citizens," even within a movement dedicated to equal rights. As the Civil Rights Movement split over the emergence of Black Power, many white woman civil rights activists joined the New Left, a predominantly campus-based organization that started groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). There, too, women experienced condescension from white male radicals.

Soon, they started the women's liberation movement. Not a national, hierarchical organization like NOW, women's liberation groups emerged in grassroots settings where fifteen or twenty women gathered together for "consciousness-raising" sessions where they explored what it was like to be a woman. As such groups proliferated, a sea change occurred in the attitudes of young women. The result was a revolution in social values. No longer did most young women believe that happiness could be found solely in marriage and children. Growing numbers of women sought independence, equal relationships, and careers; they married later, had fewer children, and insisted on equal access to careers. In 1965, only 5 percent of all students entering medical school, law school, or business school were women. Twenty-five years later, that figure had skyrocketed to 50 percent.

Protest movements in the 1960s culminated when activists zeroed in on the Vietnam War as a primary example of what was wrong with American society. The war itself was a direct product of the Cold War. During World War II, Americans enjoyed an informal alliance with Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Vietnamese resistance against Japan. But when France re-imposed its colonial regime in Indochina, the United States supported its NATO ally against Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese nationalists. When the French withdrew in 1954, the United States supported a pro-Western South Vietnamese government. John F. Kennedy increased American troop strength from 800 to 15,000, but resisted requests for more troops. Bolstered by his success during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Kennedy gave every indication that he would begin withdrawing American troops after the 1964 election. But after the assassination, Lyndon Johnson, far less experienced than Kennedy, believed he had to resist Communist insurrection in Vietnam at all costs. By July 1965 Johnson had begun escalating American involvement in Vietnam, and the number of troops soon reached 540,000.

Initial protest against the war was moderate. It began with “teach-ins,” where opponents of the war debated representatives of the State Department in the hope that reason would prevail. But intellectual argument changed nothing. Student activists quickly intensified their protests. They demonstrated against universities that had defense industry contracts or that hosted recruitment visits from companies like Dow Chemical, the manufacturer of napalm. Soon, anti-war protestors started burning draft cards and calling the police who opposed them “capitalist pigs.” By the end of 1967, it was nearly impossible for an administration official to visit a college campus anywhere in the country without rowdy and violent demonstrations.

As the presidential election year of 1968 dawned, the nation was split apart more severely than at any time since the Civil War. Radical student groups threatened to take over campuses. The “Weathermen,” a break-off group from SDS, called for violent revolution. More moderate reformers rallied behind the anti-war presidential candidacy of Senator Eugene McCarthy from Minnesota, who contested Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. A rapid-fire succession of explosive developments made the world seem dramatically different with each passing month.

In January, Vietnamese insurgents launched the Tet offensive (during the Vietnamese new year), assaulting every major South Vietnamese city, even briefly occupying the US Embassy in Saigon. One month later, Eugene McCarthy captured 48 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary. The next week, Robert F. Kennedy, also an anti-war senator, joined the presidential campaign. On March 31, Lyndon Johnson announced a halt in the bombing of North Vietnam, then stunned the nation by declaring he would not run for re-election. Four days later, on April 4,

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. In reaction to King's death, despite leaders urging for non-violence in his honor, riots broke out in more than 110 American cities. In May, students occupied the main administration buildings at Columbia University protesting racist policies. Then on June 5, Robert F. Kennedy was gunned down after winning the California primary, seemingly on his way to the Democratic presidential nomination. In August, the Democratic National Convention was racked by violence, and Chicago police engaged in brutal attacks against journalists and student protestors. The presidential race was dominated by a sense of domestic crisis. Alabama Governor George Wallace, a third-party candidate, lambasted all protestors as traitors. Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee, called for a return to law and order, claiming to speak for the "silent majority" who believed in patriotism, hard work, and reverence for God. Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey sought to find a middle ground in vain, though he did almost win.

The election of Richard Nixon inaugurated a new era of conservatism, based on rallying mainstream Americans against social experimentation and protest groups. Although he had dedicated his presidency to "bringing us together," Nixon practiced a politics of polarization. His "Southern strategy" sought to use racial conflict as a basis for creating a new Solid South, this time dominated by white Republicans. Spiro Agnew, his alliterative vice president, gave repeated speeches denouncing the "nattering nabobs of negativism" who insisted on criticizing rather than celebrating America. While Nixon had spoken of a "secret plan" to end the Vietnam War, he chose a strange way of executing it, engaging in secret bombing of Cambodia and then invading the country, a course that prompted renewed student protests and led to the killing of four student demonstrators by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio. Although Nixon finally ended the war in 1973 (on terms virtually identical to those he could have had in 1969), he did so by such excessive bombing of Hanoi that he seemed to be out to prove that he was the "mad man" that he wanted his enemies to think he was.

Nixon's greatest achievements were in the foreign policy realm, which he cared about more deeply than anything else. A person who detested most of his own Cabinet and the daily routine of presidential meetings, Nixon spent as much time as he could by himself in a small study off the Oval Office. Most often, his hopes focused on transforming America's relations with China. As one of the most inveterate anti-Communists to ever walk the halls of Congress, Nixon was ideally situated to reverse nearly a quarter century of hostility and open relations with Peking. After all, no one could accuse him of being soft on Communism. Plotting with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger (he never told his secretary of state about his China plans), Nixon secretly arranged the dramatic breakthrough. He went personally to China, met with Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, and

inaugurated diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. It was a master stroke.

While Nixon could be a visionary on foreign policy, he also engaged in petty, self-destructive, and vindictive efforts to squash his political adversaries. Going into the 1972 presidential election, it was clear that Nixon would easily defeat his opponent, George McGovern. But for Nixon that was not enough; he wanted to destroy his foes. Nixon created "the Plumbers," a group of secret operatives who broke into offices of the political opposition and sought to sabotage their campaigns. When the Plumbers entered the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate apartment complex for the second time (the first effort was botched), an alert security guard noticed the break-in and the burglars were arrested. Soon two *Washington Post* cub reporters, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, discovered the names of White House officials in the notebook of the Plumbers' leader. Although it took nearly two years, the full story finally came out. The President of the United States not only helped to create the Plumbers, he also schemed to pay them off if they stayed quiet and explicitly ordered a campaign to obstruct justice. Ironically, all this was taped by ubiquitous tape recorders set up by Nixon himself to document his presidency. Eventually, Watergate led Republicans and Democrats alike to conclude that Nixon had to go, and in the summer of 1974 Richard Nixon, faced with impeachment, resigned the office of the presidency. Gerald Ford assumed the presidency.

Watergate inaugurated an era of malaise in America. A series of developments in the 1970s caused the American people to doubt that the nation could continue to reign, unchallenged, as ruler of the world. In 1973 and 1974, an OAPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) embargo on oil sales highlighted America's dependence on Middle Eastern fuel, with mile-long gas lines forming in every major city. "Stagflation" became the byword for the American economy. For the first time, high unemployment went hand in hand with high inflation rates, both in double digits. As the economy foundered, so too did the nation's sense of well being and moral stability. Supreme Court decisions legalizing abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973) and other rulings such as the outlawing of school prayer in the 1960s enraged millions of conservatives. When Americans were forced to flee Saigon in 1975, clinging to helicopters, it seemed a fitting symbol of the country's decline, economically, politically, militarily, and on issues of basic social values.

Jimmy Carter's election to the presidency in 1976 seemed like a partial answer. An unknown politician and a born-again Christian who told the American people they deserved a government as moral and as competent as its citizens, the former Georgia governor seemed ideally suited to restore a sense of stability to the nation. But Carter did not know how to deal with Congress. The energy crisis overwhelmed him. So too did inflation rates nearing 20 percent. Although he represented a breath of fresh air in foreign policy, especially in espousing democratic regimes in Africa

and Latin America, Carter ultimately fell victim to one of the most humiliating defeats America had experienced—the seizure of the American embassy in Teheran, Iran, and the holding of more than sixty American hostages for over a year. Nothing more powerfully exemplified America’s new sense of powerlessness.

Ronald Reagan was the “cowboy” who came riding in from the West to rescue America’s sense of well being and pride. An actor, Reagan exuded leadership and strength. He operated on a simple creed: Capitalism was the only economic system that worked; people had to free themselves of the burdens of government—especially taxation—to manifest their creativity; no one should be allowed to challenge America militarily; and with these in hand, the nation would bounce back. Once again it would be “morning time in America.” To a remarkable degree, Reagan delivered. He cut taxes, created new jobs, increased the military budget dramatically, called the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” and won back the confidence of the people. Walter Mondale, the Democratic candidate for president in 1984, never stood a chance. Reagan swept forty-nine of the fifty states.

Yet Reagan’s successes (and failures) were largely a product of the staff who served him. As long as James Baker was his chief of staff and Michael Deaver scripted his lines, Reagan’s performance was impeccable. But when Baker swapped jobs with Donald Regan, Secretary of the Treasury, everything fell apart. Regan lacked the finesse of Baker. New National Security aides Oliver North and Admiral John Poindexter had Reagan sign off on the Iran-Contra affair—a scheme to have Israel sell US arms to Iran to free hostages and then use the profits to arm the “Contra” rebels in Nicaragua. Unfortunately, aiding the “Contras” was a direct violation of the Boland Amendment, a Congressional act that prohibited such aid. Reagan, never a “hands-on” president, was oblivious to the entire disaster. With poor staff, he blundered badly and, once more, it seemed that America was doomed to be afflicted with a failed chief executive.

Yet in the end, Reagan pulled off a miracle. At his wife Nancy’s prompting, he had entered into intense negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union. Unable to compete financially or militarily with Reagan’s arms buildup, Gorbachev was ready for peace. He also recognized the futility of pursuing policies of Stalinist repression within his own country. As a result, Gorbachev and Reagan arrived at a dramatic arms control treaty and set the world on a path that signified the end of the Cold War. Returning from a triumphant final visit to Moscow, Reagan told the press that what he had just done was like being in a Cecil B. DeMille movie. It was, he said “the role of a lifetime.”

Reagan’s immediate successor—and his vice president—was George Herbert Walker Bush, a Yankee transplanted to Texas who had been a Congressman, ambassador to the United Nations and to China, and CIA director. Using his

experience to brilliant effect, Bush presided masterfully over the end of the Cold War. To the astonishment of the world, the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 after twenty-eight years. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union itself fell apart, literally, with its constituent parts breaking away to form independent republics. Bush handled it all well, always careful to respect the sensibilities of other nations. Partly because of that skill, he shaped the most effective coalition of the post-Cold War world. Carefully putting together a military and political force of sixty-five nations under a United Nations mandate, Bush led a military drive, presided over by General Colin Powell, that removed Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi forces from the oil-rich nation of Kuwait in 1991. After “Operation Desert Storm,” Bush’s popularity rating soared to 91 percent.

Bush seemed tone deaf, however, when it came to responding to the economic recession that swept the country in 1991–1992. Due to Bush’s lack of creative response, a presidential contest that in early 1991 seemed hopeless for any Democrat suddenly became a toss-up. In the absence of other candidates—most of whom thought Bush was unbeatable—a young governor from Arkansas, William Jefferson Clinton, proved singularly adept at forging a political coalition consisting of the old New Deal Democrats and a group of new centrist Democrats who hued to the middle and loved the idea of a charismatic, bright leader.

Pivotal to Clinton-era politics was the partnership that existed between the President and First Lady Hillary Clinton. Not since Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt had there been such a political team. But unlike the Roosevelts, Bill and Hillary talked explicitly about a “co-presidency.” She was involved in decisions, at times taking the lead role. As a result, there was no single person in charge during the administration’s first two years.

In the end, the hallmark of Bill Clinton’s presidency was the deficit reduction package he passed in 1993, with increased taxes, reduced spending, and an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit for poor people. It passed by just one vote in the House, with Vice President Al Gore casting a tie-breaking vote in the Senate. The plan produced a surplus and a projected elimination of the national debt, while creating an economic climate that created a precedent-shattering twenty-two million jobs.

But the other main story of the first two years was a failed health care reform package, developed by a task force led by Hillary Clinton. In neither design nor execution did she display sensitivity to political realities. Indeed, so unpopular was the bill that it never even came to a Congressional vote. Moreover, disgust about the whole process led to a devastating defeat for the Democrats in 1994, led by Newt Gingrich, who moved forward with a conservative agenda—his “Contract with

America”—that threatened to cut taxes, trim Medicare, and return to an age of laissez-faire economics.

But Clinton had not earned the label of being the “comeback kid” for nothing. During 1995–1996, he masterminded a brilliant campaign to make Gingrich look like a reactionary extremist. In 1995, in response to the devastating Oklahoma City terrorist bombing executed by right-wing militant Timothy McVeigh, Clinton drew the country together as its spiritual and political leader. He followed up with a series of modest legislative victories—V-chips for parents to monitor their kids’ television programming; 100,000 new police officers on the streets to halt crime; tax breaks for parents of students attending college; incentives for homeowners. Clinton even signed a bill on welfare reform that promised to “end welfare as we know it.” “The era of big government is over,” he declared. Perhaps most important, Clinton made Gingrich look reckless, and when Congress decided to shut the government down rather than pass Clinton’s budget, it was Gingrich, not Clinton, who looked like an irresponsible radical. Not surprisingly, Clinton soared to re-election in 1996 over Republican Robert Dole.

But Clinton could not avoid his personal demons. In the midst of the government shutdown, he had an affair with a twenty-two-year-old White House intern. When the information was raised by a Special Prosecutor investigating the Clintons for a real estate venture in Arkansas, Clinton chose to lie, under oath, about the affair. Soon there was another Congressional impeachment process underway, and Bill Clinton became the second president in history to be indicted by Congress and brought to trial before the United States Senate. (Nixon would have been the second, but he resigned.) In the end, Clinton survived. In the view of the Senate and of over 65 percent of the American people, the affair and his perjury was not the “high crime and misdemeanor” that the Founding Fathers had in mind when they created the impeachment clause. Nevertheless, Clinton largely undermined his second term in the White House and tarnished one of the most effective presidencies of postwar America.

In perhaps the most sensational and disputed election in American history, George W. Bush was elected president in 2000. Although he lost the popular vote to Al Gore by over 540,000 votes, he appeared to win the Electoral College. The state that proved decisive was Florida, with twenty-five electoral votes, although the election there was rife with voting scandals. In many areas, minorities had difficulty getting their votes counted. In Dade County, a “butterfly” ballot was printed that confused normally pro-Democratic voters. In the end, the Supreme Court, by a 5-4 vote in *Bush v. Gore*, decided to stop the recount before it was complete and to certify the existing results. Bush would be president. But Al Gore had partially brought the defeat on himself by refusing to run on the accomplishments of the Clinton-Gore

administration and by distancing himself from Clinton—who still retained an approval rating of more than 60 percent as he left the White House.

The George W. Bush administration will be remembered forever because of the terrorist attacks by Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001. Al-Qaeda conspirators hijacked four jumbo passenger jets. Two were flown into the 110-story twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The towers collapsed, killing nearly 3,000 people. A third plane flew into the Pentagon. A fourth was headed for the White House when courageous passengers and crew stormed the cockpit and forced the plane to crash in the Pennsylvania countryside. It was a time of national shock parallel to that which occurred after the attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Everyone was united, including allies around the globe.

But unlike the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the American people were not asked to engage in common sacrifice. Instead of people paying more taxes for a strengthened military, tax rates were cut, especially for the rich and powerful. President Bush announced "the War on Terror," a military campaign against Afghanistan, the home base of Osama bin Laden, with the approval of the American people. But then Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld refocused their attention on Saddam Hussein's Iraq. With none of the coalition-building that his father had engaged in for "Desert Storm" in 1991, the younger Bush proceeded without UN sanction. The administration cited Clinton's 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, which stated Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, to ensure Congressional authorization for the attack. The American invasion of Iraq was carried out with less than half the number of troops Colin Powell had gathered in 1991, as the war continued in Afghanistan. What followed was an eight-year civil war inside Iraq. Despite assiduous efforts, no weapons of mass destruction were found. Confused, angry, and frustrated, Americans returned to the tortured divisions of the Vietnam War era. Like that earlier war, the Iraq conflict polarized the country, except that this time, with no draft, volunteer soldiers paid the price through multiple tours of duty, while average Americans simply enjoyed their lower taxes.

Like John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton before him, Barack Obama came to the presidency as a messenger of change, a leader who would restore America to its path as a leader among nations. The first black president, Obama rallied people who had never voted before with "Change we can believe in" and "Yes we can." But although Obama achieved much of what he set out to accomplish—national health insurance (the first president in a hundred years to succeed), rigorous re-regulation of investment banking and Wall Street, a new arms control agreement, repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" to legalize the service of gay men and women in the Armed Forces—the recession Obama inherited from Bush would not go away. As a result, in 2010 the Democratic Party suffered a defeat in the Congressional elections parallel to that which Clinton suffered in 1994. America

seemed caught in a never-ending pendulum of politics swinging from one side to the other.

Where it might end no one can predict. But every major theme of the past sixty years had its origins in World War II and its aftermath. The question is whether, as in World War II, America can find a new and shared sense of mission to carry it forward into the new millennium.

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