

Name: _____

The 1980s: Government and Politics: Overview

American Decades, 2001
From U.S. History in Context

Directions: Annotate impact / changes, challenges or continuances of our main constitutional principles

Individual rights
Checks + Balances
Separation of Powers
Federalism

The Reagan Decade

In American politics the 1980s were the decade of Ronald Reagan, who was elected president in 1980 and succeeded by his vice president, George Bush, in 1989. Reagan's vision of the nation—and to a somewhat lesser extent his conservative agenda—shaped the economic and political fortunes of the United States for most of the 1980s.

Malaise

As the decade began, Americans were struggling with an image of a country that was no longer the most powerful and prosperous nation in the world. Trust in politicians had been eroded by a series of political scandals that began in 1974 with the spectacle of an administration disgraced, as Richard Nixon resigned the presidency in the wake of Watergate, and continued into the 1980s with revelations about bribery of elected officials in the FBI Abscam sting. Social problems such as drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and violent crime were on the rise. The American economy exhibited a conjunction of high inflation, rising unemployment, and little growth. Americans were losing well-paying manufacturing jobs and taking low-paying service jobs in their place. Japan and Germany were challenging American dominance in world trade, and the United States was incurring larger and larger trade imbalances. As the major oil-producing countries raised the price of oil higher and higher, Americans were spending more and more of their incomes for gasoline and heating fuels.

Insecurity

The cost of human lives and international prestige incurred by a losing military effort in Vietnam had Congress shying away from Third World conflicts. Yet the Soviet Union seemed more aggressive than ever in expanding its sphere of influence. When student radicals seized the American embassy in Tehran, Iran, in late 1979 and held its staff hostage over the next fourteen months, Americans learned a frustrating lesson that was repeated again and again during the 1980s: even the finest, best-equipped military force in the world could not protect American citizens from political terrorism.

Reagan's Campaign

During the 1980 presidential campaign Ronald Reagan projected an optimistic, "can-do" persona and offered an appealing vision of an America restored to its former glory and prosperity through the good-old Puritan virtues of hard work, self-reliance, and faith in God. He promised to right the economy by reducing taxes, cutting government waste and bureaucracy, balancing the budget, and eliminating the deficit. He appealed to Americans' deep-seated patriotism with his vow to restore the prestige and power of the United States in foreign policy. Americans liked what they heard. Reagan defeated incumbent president Jimmy

Carter, in large measure because of the votes of "Reagan Democrats," traditionally Democratic voters who bolted their party to vote for Reagan. Many of them were blue-collar workers dissatisfied with the Democrats' embrace of civil rights and so-called cultural liberalism. Setting aside their traditional suspicions that the Republicans were the party of the rich, they embraced Reagan's populist rhetoric. He promised them a new "supply-side" economic program that would ostensibly support their entrepreneurial spirit.

The Economy

Democrats charged that Reagan's economic program took from the poor to enrich the wealthy and that the nation he envisioned left out minorities, the disadvantaged, and the disabled. Echoing Calvin Coolidge's pronouncement in the 1920s that the "business of the United States is business," Reagan and his supporters replied that economic incentives to the wealthy stimulated investment in American companies, creating a "trickle-down" of prosperity to the American worker through jobs and raises.

Deficits and Economic Growth

Reagan's economic program never actually worked as planned. Tax-reform bills passed in 1981 and 1986 substantially reduced rates for personal and corporate income taxes, but the economy did not grow quickly enough to offset the loss of revenue. Owing in part to the reluctance of Congress to cut programs such as Social Security as much as the administration wanted, but primarily to major increases in military spending, the federal deficit had grown enormously by the end of the decade. While Reagan could take credit for strengthening the economy and curbing inflation, the huge deficit and an alarming trade imbalance offset his economic accomplishments.

The Reagan Doctrine

From the beginning the Reagan administration conducted foreign policy according to the maxim that an enemy of Communism was a friend to the United States. Money, arms, and military assistance were provided to regimes fighting Communist insurgencies and to guerrilla forces fighting Marxist governments—regardless of human-rights violations or authoritarian practices on the part of those regimes. Furthermore, Reagan sometimes used military force, sending the Marines to Lebanon to assist in peacekeeping, bombing Libya in retaliation for its support of Arab terrorists, and invading Grenada to topple a Marxist regime. He nearly scrapped President Richard Nixon's policy of détente with the Soviet Union, authorizing a massive arms buildup and creating a strategic policy based on the supposition that a nuclear war in Europe was winnable.

The End of the Cold War

With Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, tensions between the two superpowers were eased, and real progress was made in arms control. Gorbachev's willingness to cut Soviet aid to Third World countries and his withdrawal of Soviet troops from eastern Europe ushered in a major transformation in world politics by the end of the decade. During 1989 nearly every Communist government in eastern Europe collapsed and was replaced by a new, democratically elected government. The Berlin Wall was torn down, and in 1990 Germany was reunified. The Cold War, which had dominated global politics since the end of World War II, was over.

Scandal

Ronald Reagan began his presidency in a spirit of optimism, and for most of his eight years in office his enormous personal popularity seemed unscathed by the ethical and legal misdeeds of various members of his administration. By the middle of his second term journalists were keeping score of the number of Reagan administration officials who had been indicted—a tally that ended up with the largest number in U.S. history. Reagan, who was nearly seventy when he took office in January 1981, was the oldest man ever to serve as chief executive, and throughout his presidency there were frequent jokes about his tendency to fall asleep during cabinet meetings and his apparent ignorance about actions his administration took in his name. The laughter stopped in late 1986, when news of the Iran-Contra scandal began to break. Members of the administration had been illegally selling arms to Iran in return for the Iranians' promise of help in securing the release of Americans held hostage by Shiite radicals in Beirut. The scandal deepened when it was revealed that profits from the arms sales were diverted to aid the Contra rebels in Nicaragua—contrary to congressional prohibitions against such assistance. The scandal seriously undermined Reagan's image and the effectiveness of his administration.

The Reagan Legacy

During the eight years Reagan was in office the Republican Party became markedly more conservative, owing in large part to the rise of the religious Right, which had been a major force in his winning the Republican nomination in 1980. While Reagan gave lip service to their conservative social agenda, which included constitutional amendments requiring school prayer and banning abortion, he did little to implement their programs during his presidency. Instead he concentrated his administration's efforts on his conservative economic and foreign-policy agendas—areas in which he had a much higher degree of public approval than on issues such as prayer and abortion. By the end of his second term it was clear that the nation as a whole was far less conservative than the president's party, but it was equally clear that, for better or worse, the Reagan administration had shaped the terms of political debate for the foreseeable future. Democrats as well as Republicans were equally concerned with the mounting federal deficit. Political discourse, which since the New Deal era of the 1930s had focused on social justice and the fine-tuning of social programs to help the needy, shifted to a debate over how to reduce government spending and bureaucracy—both of which Reagan had increased vastly, despite campaign promises to the contrary.

Need for Vision

As George Bush took office in the last year of the 1980s, Democrats and Republicans alike were not only faced with serious and mounting deficits that required innovative spending cuts, they were also confronted with a world in which the Cold War would no longer serve as an organizing principle for American foreign policy. After 1945 the conservative agenda had become prioritized in a set order: anticommunism, fiscal responsibility, and social conservatism. With anti-communism no longer relevant, the conservative movement and the Republican Party in particular were faced with the growing debate between traditional fiscal conservatives, who wanted to focus on economic reform, and the religious right, who sought to focus on social issues. The search for a new world order and a fresh American political agenda was set to begin.

Source Citation

"The 1980s: Government and Politics: Overview." *American Decades*. Ed. Judith S. Baughman, et al. Vol. 9: 1980-1989. Detroit: Gale, 2001. *U.S. History in Context*. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.

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