
Overview
By 1980 a new conservatism, called the “New Right” emerged. It was fueled by religious change and the emergence of a conservative counter-establishment. In 1980 the New Right offered a new candidate, Ronald Reagan. Not since Franklin Roosevelt has an American president shaped American life so decisively as Ronald Reagan. His supporters believed the president spurred a “Reagan Revolution,” a conservative transformation of the nation’s political economy. His actions to restore the economy won him reelection in 1984. Reagan’s foreign policy was based on the old-time conservatism. Reagan rejected détente and instead revived the old Cold War anticommunism of the 1940s and 1950s. It was easier to focus on communism than the Middle East conflict, terrorism, or Japanese economic competition. President Reagan and the social conservatism he symbolized met with considerable opposition. The conservatives wanted to restore supposedly traditional values and practices. They wanted to uphold gender roles and sexual morés. Their challenges to the equal rights and opportunities gained by disadvantaged groups was particularly controversial. The conservatives found that many Americans were unwilling to give up the hard-fought gains of the 1960s and 1970s. For all of the conservative rhetoric of the Reagan administration, the period was rocked by scandals that called their credibility and sincerity into question.

Key Topics The information in chapter 30 introduces your students to the following key topics:
- The ways in which economic and religious change encouraged the emergence of a new conservatism
- The Reagan administration’s efforts to enact the conservative agenda in domestic and foreign policy
- The deep divisions among Americans over such social issues as school prayer, education reform, drugs, abortion, affirmative action, and gay rights
- The limits of the conservative triumph in the 1980s

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Donald and Ivana Trump: Symbolic of the 1980s, Donald and Ivana Trump had it all: money, beauty, and fame. They were the new millionaires. By the end of the decade they were divorced and broke.

A New Conservative Majority: By 1980 a new conservatism, called the “New Right” emerged. It was fueled by religious change and the emergence of a conservative counter-establishment. In 1980 the New Right offered a new candidate, Ronald Reagan.

- Economic change and population shifts to the Sunbelt states resulted in political reapportionment that gave congressional seats and electoral votes to the relatively conservative Sunbelt states. The computer industry seemed to promise the solution to the nation’s economic decline and as the micro-computer industry helped stimulate economic growth, other areas of the nation’s business world changed as well. The 1980s was a decade of corporate mergers and takeover.
- Americans looked at takeovers, the growth of the Sunbelt, and the computer industry and saw hopes for an economic revival. Material concerns replaced the social concerns of the 1960s. Wealthy freewheeling businessmen became heroes. Materialism and consumption became virtuous once again. “Young urban professionals” or “yuppies” with their self-centered materialism were symbolic of the return to a more conservative, money-driven way of life.
- The same time Americans returned to religion and conservative values to find meaning in their lives. Membership in conservative, evangelical Christian denominations grew and the denominations took conservative stands on social and economic issues. By 1980 the religious right had become a powerful political movement. Television became a powerful tool for the religious right as televangelists spread the gospel of conservatism. They were opposed to women’s liberation, abortion, gay rights, and many of the Great Society programs.
- By 1980 the Moral Minority and other evangelical groups were part of an emerging infrastructure of people and organizations dedicated to conservative ideas and causes. Conservative institutions and special interest pressure groups formed to lobby for conservative legislation and support conservative political campaigns. The New Right praised free enterprise and minimal regulation of economic life. Although they opposed the use of government power to control the economic realm they favored government power to control social issues such as school prayer, abortion, and gay rights. They were also fiercely anticommunist.
- The election of 1980 featured the incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter, the Republican challenger Ronald Reagan and independent moderate Republican John Anderson. The Republican campaign offered a conservative vision of less government, lower taxes, and renewed military power for the United States. Carter’s campaign was hampered by economic weakness and the continuing hostage crisis in Iran. Reagan defeated the incumbent. The Congress was split: the House was controlled by the Democrats and the Senate by the Republicans. Reagan’s victory marked the emergence of a conservative majority.

What were the main values and goals of the new conservatism in the 1980s? What role did business and religion play in shaping the conservative movement?

The Reagan Revolution at Home: Not since Franklin Roosevelt has an American president shaped American life so decisively as Ronald Reagan. His supporters believed the president spurred a “Reagan Revolution”, a conservative transformation of the nation’s political economy. His actions to restore economic won him reelection in 1984.

- Ronald Reagan’s style was optimistic and he had something of the common touch about him even though he lived a life of luxury. His optimism went beyond style, it was conveyed in his speech and actions. Reagan appeared to love being president and his opinions ratings were generally high. The hostages in
Iran were released the morning of his inauguration. Reagan’s optimism prevented pessimism, even when an assassin’s bullet nearly killed him.

- But Reagan was more than just style. He represented a clear conservative alternative to the liberal policies of the New Deal and the Great Society. He endorsed the “New Federalism”, a program designed to return power and tax revenue to state governments claiming it would promote efficiency and economic growth. The president wanted to reduce food stamps, school lunch programs, and aid to cities’ funding and Congress did cut appropriations for urban public housing and eliminated job training for the unemployed. Social Security and Medicare were left untouched. Although his administration could not tear down welfare or other benefits, Reagan did manage to slow the growth of welfare and shrink budgets of some government programs he did not like.

- Reagan’s overall economic philosophy held that the nation prospered most when the government left Americans free to manage their personal economies. Known as “Reaganomics,” the theory was based on a relatively new theory known as “supply side economics.” Basically it holds that in order for government to promote prosperity it should cut taxes and leave more money in the hands of businesses and allow them to invest in more production of goods and services. An increase in supply would stimulate prosperity and lead to more tax revenue for the government. The other change Reagan wanted to see was government regulation. Reagan believed that federal rules and requirements stifled business. Environmental regulations were lifted. These Reaganomics applications changed the federal government’s role in the economy. They also increased the deficit. But, by the spring of 1984, the recession was over. Reagan got the credit for the recovery.

- With the return of prosperity, Reagan was re-elected to a second term against the Democratic challenger former vice president Walter Mondale and his running mate Geraldine Ferraro, the first female vice presidential nominee. Reagan’s Republican victory did not translate to a Republican victory in the House of Representatives. Congress was still divided.

What was the Reagan Revolution in domestic policy? How did Reagan’s domestic programs reflect conservative values?

The Reagan Revolution Abroad: Reagan’s foreign policy was based on the old-time conservatism. Reagan rejected détente and instead revived the old Cold War anticommunism of the 1940s and 1950s. It was easier to focus on communism than the Middle East conflict, terrorism, or Japanese economic competition.

- The president set out to restore America’s international power and increase defense. New controversial weapons were commissioned. Reagan even persuaded Congress to authorize work on a neutron bomb. He had to confront an American public that feared another, costly, losing war and he had to confront an international public that wondered if the United States could back up its words with actions.

- Containment of communism was the goal of the military build-up. Arms control talks with the Soviets went nowhere. Reagan proposed a space-based missile defense system. Although it was funded in 1983, it was far from a reality but it had a profound effect on the Soviet Union. Despite his rhetoric, Reagan reacted cautiously to communist confrontations with the United States but he had turned the foreign policy hands back in time.

- Human rights programs of the Carter administration were replaced by national security programs. The “Reagan Doctrine” demanded that pro-American anticommunist governments, especially those in Latin America and the Caribbean, be supported by the United States. The nation supported anti-communist regimes and ignored those same governments that violated their citizen’s basic human rights. This was particularly true in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Reagan wanted Congress to fund the anti-communist Somoza regime and the Contra rebels. Congress refused not wanting another Vietnam-like situation and passed the Boland Amendment which restricted aid to the Contras and banned efforts to topple the Sandinista government in El Salvador. In the Caribbean, the Reagan Doctrine was more successful. A new Marxist government had come to power on the island nation of Granada. American troops invaded, toppled the government, and put a pro-American regime in place. Where apartheid in South Africa was at issue, Reagan refused to commit American power to over-throwing the segregationist policy.

- Reagan’s foreign policy focus had little effect on the Middle East. The United States wanted to protect its supply of oil as well as its ally Israel, but Reagan couldn’t bring peace to the region or put an end to terrorism. United States Marines were sent to Lebanon to stabilize Lebanon and to end the Israeli
invasion. A terrorist killed almost 250 Americans using a truck bomb driven into a housing compound. The threat of terrorism was growing and would not go away. In the war between Iran and Iraq the United States sent Navy ships to protect oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. Americans were killed when Iraqi missiles struck an American cruiser and Iranians were killed when a United States missile accidentally shot down an Iranian airliner.

- Japanese and American trade relations were stressful and even though it tried, it could not dictate trade policy with Japan. Japan dominated much of the American economy and Congress believed the Japanese discriminated against American goods. Despite quota, devaluing the dollar, and the imposition of high tariffs, the trade imbalance continued.

Describe the aims of Reagan's foreign policy. How did his goals differ from those of earlier presidents during the Cold War?

**The Battle over Conservative Social Values:** President Reagan and the social conservatism he symbolized met with considerable opposition. The conservatives wanted to restore supposedly traditional values and practices. They wanted to uphold gender roles and sexual mores. Their challenges to the equal rights and opportunities gained by disadvantaged groups was particularly controversial. The conservatives found that many Americans were unwilling to give up the hard-fought gains of the 1960s and 1970s.

- When the conservatives took power in the 1980s they were determined to take control of the courts, especially the Supreme Court, which they believed had gone too far in protecting individual and especially defendant’s rights. President Reagan’s appointments to the federal courts were young and staunchly conservative. The “war on drugs” program was designed to stop the spread of drug use, especially among school age children.

- The conservatives also attacked the social changes brought about by the women’s movement. Out-spoken evangelicals blamed the women’s movement for undermining the family, among other things. But despite the rhetoric and especially their attempts to outlaw abortion, the Reagan conservatives were unable to turn back the earlier gains or the economic realities which forced many women to work. Women’s public roles continued to expand in the 1980s. President Reagan gave women new public prominence by naming women to high government office.

- Conservatives and evangelicals were also opposed to the public acceptance of homosexual men and women. National crusades tried to turn back their advances. The conservative backlash over gay rights was even more emotional than issues surrounding race or gender. The gay rights issue was played in front of the tragic backdrop of AIDS. Evangelicals saw the epidemic, which struck gay men more than heterosexual men, as a “gay cancer” and categorized it as God’s punishment for the supposed sin of homosexuality. The conservatives in the federal government were slow to fund research into the causes of AIDS or the cure. The conservative agenda was not successful in making homosexuality and AIDS and HIV disappear.

- Civil rights advances was another area that Reagan conservatives wanted to roll back but again they did not have much success in that area either. The conservatives were especially opposed to the federal government acting to support civil rights and economic opportunity for African Americans. Reagan and the conservatives opposed the renewal of the Voting Rights Act, school busing, affirmative action, and a federal holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Black activism made it hard for the Reagan administration to ignore civil rights issues. Where the disadvantaged and minority groups were concerned, the conservatives were unable to make much headway implementing their agenda but neither did the minority groups make many advances.

What groups resisted the conservative social agenda in the 1980? How did the desire for equal rights and opportunities conflict with conservatism?

**The Limits of the New Conservatism:** For all of the conservative rhetoric of the Reagan administration, the period was rocked by scandals that called their credibility and sincerity into question.

- The misdeeds of American business and religious leaders tarnished the conservative cause. Ivan Boskey and Michael Milken were found to have acquired some of their fortunes through shady or illegal business deals. Leona Helmsley was indicted for tax evasion. Their arrogance caused Americans to re-evaluate their prioritization of profits above morality. When televangelists’ immorality and greed were exposed,
Americans were also challenged to be a bit more critical of those who proclaimed a right to establish the nation’s morality.

- The Reagan administration also had its share of political scandals which ranged from unethical behavior to serious violations of federal law. For President Reagan, the taint of scandal caused his popularity ratings to fall. Overshadowing the sleazy business deals and allegations of poor personal integrity was what became know as the Iran-Contra affair. The scandal had the potential to drive President Reagan from office and if it could be proved that he knew about the crimes before hand he could have faced impeachment. Following three separate investigations, it was clear that President Reagan was probably deeply involved but there was no evidence of impeachable offenses.

- The conservative agenda was not as popular with the American public as Ronald Reagan. In part Reagan could not control Congress. In his second term in particular, the Congress was more defiant of the president and the president more incapable of leading or pushing the Congress where it did not want to go. Taxes, labor issues, and environmental concerns divided the White House and the Congress.

- Economic problems returned during Reagan’s second term. Conservative economic policies could not solve the persistent poverty and distances between rich and poor. The nation could not ignore the problems because of the growing numbers of homeless in America. “Reaganomics” was producing more inequalities rather than limiting them. Twenty-nine million Americans lived below the poverty line in 1980; in 1990 the number had grown to 37 million. The economic issue was hotly debated by Republicans and Democrats and while they debated the merits of their economic theories and the failures of the other party the deficit grew. American developed a trade deficit, and the New York Stock exchange plummeted in 1987. October 19, 1987, saw the Dow Jones Industrial Average drop 508 points or 23 percent of its value in one day. The Reagan economic plan collapsed. What one journalist called the Reagan “illusion” was clear: the nation could not decrease taxes and increase defense spending without paying the price.

- Ronald Reagan was called the “Teflon President” because neither scandal nor economic collapse could stick to the president. The Reagan success was partly due to his political skills and to the fact that Americans generally liked him. Reagan’s successes came about because of changes in the Soviet Union. By the mid 1980s the Soviet Union was suffering from a weak economy, a war in Afghanistan, and a costly arms race. A new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, called for restructuring the economy and tolerating more open discussion. He advocated an easing of tensions between East and West so that the costly arms race could be slowed. The Soviets and Americans signed a treaty destroying stock-piled medium range nuclear bombs. Tensions between the United States and Soviet Union had been reduced and the Cold War was over. Ronald Reagan left office in January 1989 a very popular man. In fact he had the highest popularity rating of any president since the beginning of polling in the 1930s.

What factors limited the triumph of the new conservatism? Did conservatives really succeed in the 1980s?

**Feature: Focus on Youth: The Yuppies:** Young Urban Professionals – conservative, wealthy, and free-spending – supposedly symbolized the good things about the Reagan era. Yuppies were counter-balanced in the minds of Americans by those young Americans who had a hard time finding a job that paid their bills.

**Conclusion:** In retrospect, President Reagan helped implement a new conservative vision of the political economy that featured reduced government, supply-side economics, and renewed Cold War. President Reagan also combated the sense of national decline that Presidents Ford and Carter had to combat.

**Making links to other ideas** Using the maps and websites, in addition to your prepared lectures and other assignments, can give you more resources to enable your students to see that history is much more than memorizing names and dates. You will find that the websites are even more comprehensive and adaptable than described and because they have been collected here in one volume you have a world of information no further away than the click of your mouse. If you are new to the web’s opportunities, you will be pleasantly surprised at the breadth and depth of the information available in these sites.
Map 01. What information does this map convey? What accounts for the growth of evangelical Christianity in the south? What accounts for its slower growth in other regions? Does the information on this map have any bearing on the following Map?

Map 02. What is the numerical difference between the number of popular votes cast for Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter? What accounts for Reagan’s 440 electoral college margin over Carter?

Map 03. Locate Granada. Compare this map with the map in chapter 20.03B, 21.02, and 28.02. What are the similarities and differences in American presence in the Caribbean and Central America during these decades?

Map 04. Which states had the largest number of abortions? The least number?

Web connections and resources Consider using these websites to supplement your students’ reading and analytical skills. The sites were chosen because of their relevance to the material in the chapter -- not just to mirror it but to provide additional materials and perspectives. Questions from the student study guide have been included so that you can use or amend them to your own needs. Your students may find it insightful for you to guide them through the site as you help them develop research strategies.


The gap between rich and poor grew in the 1980s, shrinking the middle class that had been growing. New jobs paid poorly and tax changes benefitted the well-to-do, with the result that income (after taxes were paid out) shot up by two-thirds for the 1% who had the most to begin with. Most Americans’ after-tax incomes stagnated or shrunk because real wages became lower, and consumer debt became higher. Why this shift in the way government distributed income? What did growing inequality mean for most citizens?

“Possible Soviet Responses to the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative” http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/offdocs/m8310017.htm

From the office of the Director of Central Intelligence, this report seeks to ascertain Soviet military strength and intentions during the Reagan era.

1. According to the Director of the CIA, what was the Soviet military strength at the time? What were their intentions?
2. What did he suggest the president do about this, if anything?


This comprehensive site contains information on the Iran-Contra affair, a timeline of Reagan’s presidency, in-depth coverage of the 1982 recession and the Grenada invasion, and text copies of many of Reagan’s presidential speeches. A companion site to a documentary on the President, this site also contains transcripts of interviews with scholars about the Reagan presidency.

1. Read President Reagan’s speech about the Iran Contra affair on March 4, 1987. What is President Reagan’s summary of events? According to the president what happened and why? What are his resolutions about these events?

Analytical reading Your students may need more experience analyzing a short reading passage so that he or she can determine its component parts. They may need help identifying primary and supporting information as well as the author’s analysis. The analytical reading passages and the questions from the student study guide have been duplicated in the instructor’s manual for your use. Your students may need direction and encouragement in using them.

The crash was one more economic blow to the Reagan Revolution. “What crashed was more than just the market,” a journalist concluded. “It was the Reagan Illusion -- the idea that there could be a defense buildup and tax cuts without a price, that the country could live beyond its means indefinitely.” Moreover, Reaganomics had not halted the growth of poverty, inequality, homelessness, and trade deficits. In the late 1980s, the American economy, like Ivana Trump, apparently could not have it all.

1. In addition to the market, what else crashed?
2. Finish this thought: In referring to the “Reagan Illusion,” the journalist was alluding to:

**Writing** The questions or writing prompts from the student study guide have been duplicated here for your use. These writing topics make good lecture topics especially if you help your students see the development of the idea in lecture format before they refine the idea in their writing assignments.

1. What was the Reagan Revolution? Was it indeed revolutionary?
2. Despite his popularity, why was it nearly impossible for the Reagan administration to make substantive changes in the New Deal and Great Society programs?
3. Compare and contrast Keynesian economics with the Reagan supply-side economics.
5. Despite his popularity, the new social conservativism met with considerable opposition. In what ways was it obvious that the conservative social values of the 1980s were controversial?
6. President Reagan was sometimes called the “Teflon President.” Why? What evidence supports or denies this characterization?

**Lecture Strategies** Ultimately the lecture is where you impart, or profess, your knowledge for the benefit of your students. These strategies were designed around the textbook and if your classroom strategy is to use the organization of the text to organize your course content, these lecture ideas may prove helpful. However, if you lecture around themes please see the section entitled “Thematic Lecture Topics.” You may find that you are more comfortable with and your students are more responsive to a combination of the two.

From Nixon, Ford, and Carter, we move to President Reagan and from economic decline we move to a period very similar to that of the Gilded Age and the Industrial Revolution.

The Cold War took a decided shift to the right under President Reagan and whether it was American troops on the island of Granada or the development of neutron bombs, Reagan saw the world from a decidedly cold warrior viewpoint. If you have been tracing the development of the Cold War, Reagan provides a volume of material to draw from.

His economic policy was also revolutionary. Supply-side economics, or Reaganomics, allows you to discuss the nature of government and economic theory with your students. Ask them to evaluate Keynesian economic theory with Reaganomics. This will also allow you to evaluate the nature of government regulations and deregulation.

Having studied the use and misuse of presidential power in Watergate, the Iran Contra affair is not just an interesting story of international intrigue but also an interesting study of how this president seemed to be able to distance himself from anything unflattering or even illegal.

Have your students evaluate the fact that Regan’s popularity was not translated into Republican control of the Congress. This brings you back to the question of whether it was his philosophy or his personality that Americans found so reassuring.

Gay Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and women continued to fight for their rights despite a decided shift of the political and public attitude to the right. If you have been discussing civil rights throughout the course, your students, by now, should have some understanding of the tendency for the public to refuse to give back rights they, and others, have acquired. Even though Reagan and his supporters may have wanted the nation to return to a different time and take back hard-won rights, the American public would not support this. Nor would they give up any of their own social programs. Look at the president’s attempts to reduce Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. You may want to have your students evaluate the actual advances made by the conservatives. By this time in the course your students are capable of dealing with more complex issues: was the conservative revolution really a revolution; was it an era of substantive change or was it an era of image?