
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. 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. 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 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

Review Questions
✓ 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?
✓ What was the Reagan Revolution in domestic policy? How did Reagan's domestic programs reflect conservative values?
✓ Describe the aims of Reagan's foreign policy. How did his goals differ from those of earlier presidents during the Cold War?
✓ What groups resisted the conservative social agenda in the 1980? How did the desire for equal rights and opportunities conflict with conservatism?
✓ What factors limited the triumph of the new conservatism? Did conservatives really succeed in the 1980s?

Annotated chapter outline
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.
- 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.
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 the economy won him reelection in 1984.

- Ronald Reagan’s style was optimistic and he had something of the common touch about him. Reagan appeared to love being president and his opinions ratings were generally high.
- Reagan 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. 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.” Reagan believed that federal rules and requirements stifled business.
- 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.

**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 anti-Communism 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.
- 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.
- 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 citizens’ basic human rights. This was particularly true in Nicaragua and El Salvador.
- 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.
- Japanese and American trade relations were stressful. Japan dominated much of the American economy and Congress believed the Japanese discriminated against American goods.

**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.
- The conservatives also attacked the social changes brought about by the women’s movement. Outspoken evangelicals blamed the women’s movement for undermining the family, among other things.
- Conservatives and evangelicals were also opposed to the public acceptance of homosexual men and women.
- 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.

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 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.

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.

Analytical reading  These questions refer to the passage “The Trumps’ American Dream” on pages 718-719.

1. In what ways did Donald and Ivana Trump believe that they symbolized the “American dream”?
2. Having read the chapter, how did the Trumps symbolize the American society, politics, and economy of the 1980s?

Lecture Strategies

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 Reagan’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?
Supplements: Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.


Documents Collection see Part Thirty: America at the Millennium

*House Judiciary Committee, Conclusion on Impeachment Resolution 1974
*Jimmy Carter, The “Malaise” Speech 1979
*Ronald Reagan, First Inaugural Address 1981
*Ronald Reagan, Speech to the House of Commons 1982
*Ronald Reagan, Address to the National Association of Evangelicals 1983
*T. Boone Pickens, “My Case for Reagan” 1984
*Paul Craig Roberts, The Supply-Side Revolution 1984
*Bill Chappell, Speech to the American Security Council Foundation 1985
*Patricia Morrisroe, “The New Class” 1985
*George Bush, Address to the Nation Announcing Allied Military Action in the Persian Gulf 1991

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.