CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: TOWARD A TRANSNATIONAL AMERICA, SINCE 1988

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KEY TOPICS
* American foreign policy after the Cold War
* The Impact of the New Economy and the boom of the 1900s
* Revelations of the 2000 Census
* The Clinton presidency and resurgent conservatism
* Globalization
* International Terrorism

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE WORLD TRADE CENTER, NEW YORK AS A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY In August 2001, Telmo Alvear became a waiter at the Windows on the World restaurant. Located on the 106th and 107th floors of the North Tower of the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City, it was called the "most spectacular restaurant in the world." The restaurant was part of the transnational community created by the over 50,000 people that work at the World Trade Center. Many of the firms renting space in the Twin Towers were multinational operations from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. The WTC symbolized American leadership and the belief that transnationalism would lay the foundation for a new world order based on democratic liberalism. The vignette shows the hopes for an American-led transnational democracy and the vulnerability of all nations and structures to surprise attack.

A NEW WORLD ORDER The Soviet Union’s political reforms enabled open opposition to Communist rule to spread throughout Eastern Europe, leading to the collapse of the Soviet bloc
and the reunification of Germany. Free elections in the Soviet Union led to the defeat of party regulars and the independence of the republics that had comprised the Soviet Union. The end of the Soviet Union meant an end to the Cold War.

Regional power struggles replaced the old East-West conflict as seen in the Persian Gulf War. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, President Bush formed a coalition ostensibly to prevent Iraqi aggression against Saudi Arabia and to enforce strict economic sanctions against Iraq. Bush shifted policies and prepared for an offensive war to drive out Iraq. The United States relentlessly bombed Iraq and in a 100-hour ground war, drove Iraq out of Kuwait. The war left Iraq devastated, though Saddam Hussein remained in power, and wreaked ecological havoc in the Gulf region. Mideast tensions worsened after the Gulf War due to the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Another result was the building of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network by Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden.

The election of 1992 gave Bill Clinton a solid mandate and a Democratic majority in Congress. Heightened ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism created unrest across the globe, and was especially evident in the Balkans. The civil war in Kosovo between Serbs and Albanians was the worst foreign crisis of Clinton's presidency. After negotiations failed, NATO bombed Serbian forces that eventually withdrew from Kosovo. Their president, Slobodan Milosevic, was indicted on war crimes.

Transnational human rights emerged as another issue. Human rights became factors in trade and diplomatic relations. International organizations were formed to work with the United Nations to aid victims of abuses. Clinton connected human rights to the expansion of democracy.

CHANGING AMERICAN COMMUNITIES  A harsh recession and a soaring national debt had eroded public confidence in the Bush administration. Democrats turned to centrist governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas who stressed the need for fiscal responsibility, a middle class tax cut, and new jobs. Billionaire H. Ross Perot won support for his independent bid with his folksy style and criticism of Washington insiders. Clinton focused on the “forgotten middle class” in an effort to return Reagan Democrats to the fold. Clinton won 43 percent of the vote to Bush’s 38 percent and Perot’s 19 percent.

Clinton broke political gridlock by positioning himself between warring Democrats and Republicans. Often backing ideas friendly to Republicans, he clashed with liberal Democrats. But he unsuccessfully promoted a plan for national health insurance that was complex and bitterly opposed by business interests. He pushed through a series of trade agreements (NAFTA and GATT) that raised fears that jobs were being sent abroad while environmental standards were being weakened at home. The greatest stimulus to the economy was the soaring stock market, led by "tech" stocks. The resulting economic boom created huge profits but critics noted the ill effects of downsizing and the pay disparity between white-and blue-collar workers plus the continuing decline of blue-collar jobs.

A small strip of land in northern California emerged as the capital of the American computer industry, euphemistically called Silicon Valley. Although it resembled a suburb, it was a sprawl of two-dozen cities that expanded rapidly as the computer industry grew. Silicon Valley divided
along class lines. The white male managers and engineers lived in affluent communities; non-unionized, Latino and Asian workers lived in environmentally scarred, poor communities with inadequate city services. The Silicon Valley economy was connected to global enterprise, linked to the micro electronic industry of the Pacific Rim. By the early 1990s the Silicon Valley had lost its boomtown atmosphere as competition increased. New computer and telecommunications technologies transformed American cultural life. VCRs and Cable TV revolutionized the American entertainment industry. Music videos shown on MTV transformed the music business. Television became even more important to political campaigns. Politicians focused on how they looked on television. But the most revolutionary aspect of the electronic culture was the Internet. The new information technologies gave rise to a media community that transcended national boundaries but the ownership of media corporations became increasingly concentrated.

The 2000 census showed the U. S., population had experienced greater growth than any other decade. Sizable improvements in the standard of living, education, housing and mobility, and household income. More than a third of the population increase came from foreign immigration, the Latino and Asian populations increased by 70 percent. Most Mexican immigrants struggled in low paying, often dangerous jobs. Another trend was intermarriage and a growing number of multiracial Americans. The immigrants formed their own communities and maintained their group identity.

A NEW AGE OF ANXIETY  In spring 1992, rioting broke out when a jury acquitted four Los Angeles police officers who had been videotaped beating a black motorist. Rioters included a mix of both Latino and African Americans, generally from the most desperate and marginal population. The rioting revealed the animosity between Korean storeowners and African-American customers who targeted the stores for destruction. For most African Americans, the Los Angeles situation seemed more desperate than ever and whites seemed not to care at all. The LA riots notwithstanding. The widening racial divide was also shown by the trial of O. J. Simpson and the percentage racial minorities in prisons, especially African-American males.

During the 1990s and early twenty-first century, random violence and terrorism escalated culminating with the catastrophic September 11, 2001 suicide attacks. The 1988 bombing of a Pan Am plane over Lockerbie, Scotland was followed by the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City that brought terrorism home. In 1998, Middle Eastern terrorists car bombed U. S. embassies in Africa. The 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City was different in that the terrorists responsible were Americans of northern European descent. One of the most tragic incidents of violence was the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

Culture wars erupted over a struggle to define American values that pit conservative Republicans and Clinton Democrats. Conservatives supported what they called universal, traditional values, while Democrats supported multiculturalism. Conflicts also arose over affirmative action, gays, and women. A growing controversy arose over stem cell research.

Throughout his political career, Bill Clinton faced questions of morality. The culture wars heated up as the 1994 election approached. Led by Newt Gingrich, a new breed of younger
conservative Republicans swept the Congressional elections of 1994. Republicans promoted a “Contract with America” of hot button issues like cutting welfare and eliminating affirmative action. Failure to compromise on a budget in 1995 shut the government down and proved a public relations disaster for the GOP.

Clinton also proved adept at co-opting Republican issues such as ending big government and balancing the budget. In the 1996 presidential election, Clinton projected a reasonable, conservative image and portrayed Republicans as conservative radicals. Benefiting from a strong economy, Clinton easily beat GOP candidate Bob Dole and independent Ross Perot. In 1998, a sex scandal embroiled the White House, leading to impeachment inquiries. But the midterm election resulted in Democratic gains, again due in part to the economic prosperity. Nonetheless, the Republican House voted to impeach Clinton for perjury and obstruction of justice.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM Following a dull campaign, the 2000 election ended with dramatic controversy. Al Gore won the popular vote but George W. Bush won the electoral vote, topped by a disputed decision in Florida that eventually involved a Supreme Court ruling. Bush pushed through a tax cut that benefited the wealthy. Bush also moved quickly to reverse environmental decisions made by Clinton. A major issue was global warming. Bush opposed the Kyoto Protocol that had been signed by 178 other nations. Globalization was studied for its economic and political implications. Globalization's role in the spread of free trade and democracy was debated.

On September 11, 2001, hijackers crashed two jetliners into the World Trade Center towers, while another crashed into the Pentagon. A fourth plane was diverted from its mission and crashed in Pennsylvania. The devastation was horrendous and played over and over on television. President Bush declared the attacks an act of war and received congressional approval to take whatever action necessary to capture the responsible parties. In the aftermath, major public events were cancelled or postponed, skyscrapers were evacuated, and airports were closed. The following day, Osama Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network were identified as the prime suspects. Bin Laden was thought to be hiding in Afghanistan and supported by the Taliban government. Bush dispatched aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf, began air strikes on Afghanistan, and declared an international war on terrorism.

CONCLUSION The September 11 attacks was the most destructive terrorist attack on the United States. The Americans responded with a military action, first to topple the Taliban government, and second to provide assistance and training to the armies of countries like the Philippines and several Central Asian republics, facing their own internal problems with terrorism.
Lecture Suggestions

1. The prosperity of the 1990s, its causes and impact, as well as who benefited and who did not. Explore the idea of an economic transformation to an information economy.

2. Despite all his troubles, Bill Clinton remained an extremely popular figure. A discussion on why he was so popular and why he was able to maintain this appeal might help students understand this complex figure.

3. The election of 2000 and the role of the Supreme Court offers a good opportunity to discuss the electoral process.

4. A final discussion on the course might give students a sense of where things are going. Also discuss the question of the war on terrorism.

Discussion Questions

1. What does transnational mean and how was the World Trade Center a transnational community?

2. Why did Iraq's takeover of Kuwait lead to such a broad-based military coalition?

3. What influence did ethnicity and religion have on the conflicts in the Balkans?

4. Why did Clinton win the 1992 election?

5. Why did the Democrats lose control of Congress in 1994? Did the 1996 election suggest they had learned something from their experiences?

6. How has terrorism affected life in the United States?

Out of Class Activity

Have students survey various print media over the last several months to identify attitudes toward the Middle East, Israelis, and Arabs assessing whether the presentation is positive or negative. Assess whether positive or negative images prevail and discuss why.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

The history of this period remains to be written. The importance of technology makes Howard Rheingold’s The Virtual Community (MIT Press, 1994) a good place to start.
Audio-Visual Aids

A & E is a good source of documentaries and biographies:

Attack at Waco (1995)


Relevant to September 11, 2001:

Osama Bin Laden: In the Name of Allah (2001)

11th of September: Bill Moyers in Conversation (2002)