

CHAPTER
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TELESCOPING THE TIMES

The United States in Today's World

Summary

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *President Bill Clinton locks horns with a Republican Congress, reflecting the heated national debate over the country's direction. Americans face economic, technological, and demographic changes that are reshaping their lives and redefining the main issues that concern citizens.*

❶ The 1990s and the New Millennium

MAIN IDEA *The Democrats gained control of the White House by moving their party's platform toward the political center.*

After the Gulf War, President George Bush had an almost 90 percent approval rating. When a recession struck, however, his support crumbled. Bush struggled in his re-election campaign against independent Ross Perot and Democrat Bill Clinton. Clinton, skilled at the television-centered campaigning, won a wide electoral majority but took only 43 percent of the popular vote.

Clinton and first lady, Hillary Clinton, devised a complex plan offering health insurance for all Americans. The plan was criticized and never got a vote in Congress. To reduce the rising national debt, Clinton raised taxes on wealthy Americans and cut spending. Republicans criticized the tax increases and wanted deeper spending cuts. Both parties avoided making cuts in social security, Medicare, and Medicaid, which were popular programs.

A booming economy, high employment and a soaring stock market capped a surplus in the federal budget. Enlarged police forces and the improved economy led to lower crime rates. But horrifying acts of terrorism in public places, including schools, raised fears among many. Some people called for tougher gun laws; others wanted less violence in the media.

In 1993, Congress approved the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The treaty with Canada and Mexico lifted all trade barriers among the three countries. Opponents argued that American workers would lose their jobs to lower-paid workers abroad.

Clinton tried to shape a new foreign policy suited to the world situation after the Cold War. Many Americans disagreed with the decisions to send troops to Bosnia and Somalia.

In 1994, Clinton was plagued by the failure of his health care reform plan and questions about family finances. Republicans took advantage of

these weaknesses to win control of both the House and Senate. Representative Newt Gingrich persuaded many Republican candidates to sign a “contract with America.” The contract promised to fix Congress, reform welfare, and pass tougher crime laws. Gingrich, chosen House Speaker, won passage of many of these measures.

The Senate did not approve all these bills, however, and Clinton vetoed others. Soon “gridlock” settled in as the Republican Congress and Democratic president disagreed on many issues. When Clinton refused to accept a Republican budget with deep cuts, the federal government was forced to shut down three times.

During 1996, there was more cooperation. Congress passed and Clinton signed a bill that changed the nation's welfare system. A modest health-insurance reform bill also became law. After a hard-fought campaign with Republican Bob Dole, Clinton won re-election in 1996. After a scandal involving a White House intern led to impeachment, Clinton remained in office until 2000, when George Bush won the presidency.

❷ The New Global Economy

MAIN IDEA *Because of technological advances and new trade laws, the U.S. economy underwent a boom during the late 20th century.*

American workers were struggling in the mid-1990s. Millions of new jobs were created and, by the turn of the century, the unemployment rate had fallen to the 1970 rate. But wage inequality widened and median household income dropped.

By 2000, nearly 80 percent of American workers were in the service sector. Younger workers suffered the high rates of unemployment. In 1999, an average 11 percent of workers aged 16–24 were unemployed—more than double the national rate. Many workers could find work only as temporary workers. Foreign competition and automation reduced the number of manufacturing jobs. To tighten their operations, many companies downsized, or cut their

workforce. In the meantime, high-tech industries took off. Those with advanced training and specialized technical skills saw salaries rise and economic security expand.

Breakthroughs in transportation and communication allowed people, goods, and information to move faster around the world. NAFTA and a new world trade agreement helped promote free trade. They also increased American workers' concerns about losing jobs. Some critics said that free trade would harm the environment by moving manufacturing plants to foreign countries with less strict laws against pollution. Still others looked toward the future filled with an endless stream of new technology.

3 Technology and Modern Life

MAIN IDEA *Advances in technology have increased the pace but also the comfort of many Americans' lives.*

Clinton and Vice President Al Gore put the government behind an effort to forge a new communications network—the “information superhighway.” It would link cable, phone, and computer systems to provide entertainment, information, and shopping. The idea helped spur tremendous growth in use of the Internet—a worldwide network of computers—used by about 97 million Americans by 2000.

In February 1996, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act. It allowed telephone and cable television companies to compete, supposedly to increase services. One early result was a concentration of media influence in the hands of a few big conglomerates.

New technologies changed many areas of life. Doctors and patients could more easily obtain new information. New treatments and new diagnostic tools were devised. Another new high-tech area was genetic engineering. Workers in this industry changed the genetic structure of living things to improve products or eliminate disease. Virtual reality and CD-ROM devices created new entertainment media. Computers became more prominent in classrooms across the nation. Improvements in transportation aimed to make driving safer with air bags and easier with on-board computerized mapping systems. Science and technology expanded the limits of what was known about earth and beyond. Space exploration continued as huge strikes were made in the biotechnology field—sequencing the human genome, for one.

Some new technologies were meant to aid the environment. Automakers developed an electric car to cut pollution caused by auto exhaust. More indi-

viduals and companies joined in efforts to recycle aluminum and paper. While fossil fuels—coal, oil, and gas—still provided most energy, research continued into other, cleaner sources.

4 The Changing Face of America

MAIN IDEA *At the end of the 20th century, the U.S. population grew more diverse both in ethnic background and in age.*

Many issues confronted Americans as the 20th century drew to a close. More and more people lived in the suburbs. Many left cities because they were overcrowded or seeking newer schools. Cities declined in size and wealth, and downtown areas suffered. In recent years, lower housing costs have attracted people to return to cities. Many employers relocated to the suburbs as well. Suburban communities competed with each other to attract companies that would provide jobs to workers. One result of this growth was suburban sprawl—the spreading out of suburbs farther from cities. Over time, the number of people from minority groups living in the suburbs increased.

The millions of Americans who were part of the postwar baby boom were aging. At the same time, average life span was lengthening. This graying of America raised issues for leaders. They would have to find ways to fund social security and Medicare when large numbers of people lived in retirement.

Growing numbers of immigrants changed the face of America. Most of these new immigrants came from the Western Hemisphere or Asia, leaving their homes to improve their lives economically. The situation aroused a heated debate. Some feared that immigrants took jobs away from native-born Americans. A related problem was illegal immigration.

Americans faced the end of the 20th century concerned about such problems as terrorism, poverty, and pollution. They looked with hope to the changing economy, new technologies, and improved education.

Review

1. How would you characterize relations between President Clinton and Congress?
2. What trends shaped the new U.S. economy?
3. How have recent technological advances changed modern life?
4. What population changes raised issues for Americans as they entered the 21st century?