Chapter 28
The Cold War Returns—and Ends, 1979–1991

Learning Objectives:

After reading Chapter 28, you should be able to:

1. Discuss the causes for the revival of anticommunism in the United States.
2. Detail the changes in Iran and Afghanistan that provoked the U.S.
4. Discuss why and how the Reagan administration re-started the Cold War.
5. Analyze the economic effects of “Reaganomics” and the attack on welfare programs.
6. Explain the reasons behind the renewed assault on the environment.
7. Detail the ways that American society became divided during the Reagan years.
8. Discuss how the rise of the religious right changed American politics and culture.
9. Understand the ways in which liberal and radical reformers fought the conservative tide.
10. Comprehend the significance of the immigration surge that hit the U.S. in the 1980s.
11. Understand what the Iran-Contra scandal showed about the Reagan administration.
12. Discuss the ways that George H.W. Bush used race, sex, and patriotism to become president.
13. Analyze the importance of the Gulf War for the Bush administration and the U.S.

Time Line

1979
Iranian militants seize U.S. embassy in Teheran
Russian army entered Afghanistan

1980
Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in presidential election

1981
CIA created Contra army to attack Nicaraguan government

1982
Boland Amendment limited aid to Contras

1983
Scientists identified HIV as cause of AIDS
1984
President Reagan re-elected over Democrat Walter Mondale

1986
Iran-Contra scandal broke
Chernobyl nuclear accident in the USSR

1987
Stock market crash

1988
George H.W. Bush elected president over Democrat Michael Dukakis

1989
Fall of the Berlin Wall
U.S. invaded Panama

1991
Operation Desert Storm against Iraq

I. Anticommunism Revived

A. Iran and Afghanistan

In 1979, the Iranian people overthrew the U.S.-backed monarchy of Shah Reza Pahlavi. Under the Shah, the tremendous oil revenues of Iran flowed only to a small elite, while the majority remained poor and increasingly resentful of the monarch and his American allies. The leader who replaced the Shah was a religious leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who demanded the U.S. return the Shah, who had fled, to Iran for trial. When President Carter refused the Iranian request, militants stormed the U.S. Embassy in Iran and held the staff prisoners until the Shah’s death and the end of Carter’s presidency. Carter focused on engineering the hostages’ release, a distraction from his re-election campaign that may have cost him the 1980 election.

The hostility of the new Iranian leadership was based on their strict Islamic beliefs, which rejected the American acceptance of materialism, gender equality, alcohol consumption, and so on. Equally hostile to the Soviet Union, the new Iranian regime represented a new challenge to American power. Reacting to a similar movement in neighboring Afghanistan, the Soviet Union sent the first of 110,000 troops in an attempt to shore up the pro-Soviet government there. Moscow had decided that the spread of Islamic revolution threatened to move into the heavily Muslim regions of the USSR and acted accordingly. Rather than seeing the Russian invasion as defensive, the U.S. saw this as Soviet aggression and Carter organized a western boycott of the
1980 Olympic games in Moscow. The CIA began funding the Islamic radicals fighting the Soviets as the U.S. increased military spending.

B. The Conservative Victory of 1980

Unable to free the hostages in Iran or to force the USSR out of Afghanistan and plagued at home by a declining economy, the Carter presidency was in crisis by mid-1980. Challenged by liberal Ted Kennedy within his own party's primaries, Carter faced Ronald Reagan in the November election. Appealing to nostalgia for a time of rising wages and U.S. military might, Reagan gave simple answers and the voters responded by giving him an overwhelming victory over Carter. The Reagan victory showed the meshing of politics and entertainment since Reagan understood that public image was far more important than detailed policy proposals. The media loved Reagan, who was a master of the brief “sound bite.”

Beyond Reagan's winning personality also lay the renewal of American conservatism. Not only did Reagan triumph, Republicans managed to defeat a number of respected liberal Democrats in congressional elections. The basic values that united the Republicans were a belief in unhindered private business, free markets, and individual responsibility.

C. Renewing the Cold War

Rejecting the policy of détente that had been practiced by Nixon, his Republican predecessor, Reagan blamed the Soviet Union for all the world's problems. The Reagan administration launched the largest military build-up in peacetime, with a 40 percent budget increase from 1980 to 1984. At the same time, covert operations were given the green light to back anticommunist governments and rebels. Even so, Reagan was unwilling to put U.S. troops in harm's way. In Nicaragua, a leftist government had taken over in 1979. In response, Reagan had the CIA organize and fund a counterrevolutionary army to fight an undeclared war against the Nicaraguan government. By 1987, 40,000 Nicaraguans had died, mainly civilians. With many other nations condemning the “Contras,” Congress passed the Boland Amendments in 1982 and 1984 to restrict U.S. intervention.

II. Republican Rule at Home

A. “Reaganomics” and the Assault on Welfare

The domestic side of the Reagan administration concentrated on tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans while cutting social programs which helped the poor. Unwilling to cut popular programs that helped the middle class, Reagan's cuts fell far short of making up for the revenue lost by tax breaks for the rich. The assault on welfare had racial links as Reagan painted welfare recipients, most of whom were rural whites, as mainly urban and African American. Pushing responsibility from the federal government to state governments was a popular policy among
southern white supporters of “states’ rights”—a slogan which often was a code for racist beliefs. Despite its many failures, “Reaganomics” did curb inflation, which dropped from 14 percent to less than 2 percent in the first three years of his first term.

B. An Embattled Environment

The 1980 election reversed two decades of bipartisan support for environmental protection. The President made fun of preserving the wilderness and even claimed “trees cause more pollution than automobiles do.” Federal lands saw grazing, logging, and mineral rights sold to private interests at far below market prices. Among the more extreme Reagan appointees was James Watt, who said there was little need to preserve public lands since Christ would soon be returning and the world would be ending. These extreme anti-environmental policies alarmed many Americans and membership in environmental organizations soared.

C. A Society Divided

Under Reagan, the gap between poor and rich widened as the wealthy became ever more affluent. By 1989, the top 1 percent possessed more assets than the bottom 90 percent, as real wages declined for most Americans. The explosion of wealth at the top fueled a culture of extravagance much like that of the late 19th century and the 1920s. Meanwhile, the broad middle class saw job security slip away as more than a million industrial jobs disappeared in 1982 alone.

Organized labor suffered as the government encouraged corporate opposition to unions. The poorest Americans saw their incomes decline by 10 percent. More than 1 million people were homeless and 20 percent lived in poverty. Still, many blue-collar Americans voted for Reagan because he made clever cultural appeals, stressing Republican opposition to abortion, homosexuality, and affirmative action.

III. Cultural Conflict

A. The Rise of the Religious Right

Outraged by the Supreme Court’s legalization of abortion and ban on organized school prayer, many conservative white Protestants became involved in politics. Upset by the shift in mainstream values away from respect for traditional authorities, this new religious right gave the Republican Party a distinctly southern, grassroots flavor. This group coexisted uneasily with the free-market wing of the party, which believed in an unrestrained capitalism with no inherent respect of tradition.

Gender and sexuality particularly upset the religious conservatives, who blamed feminism for the rising number of divorces and family problems. The sexual revolution ended in 1983 when the AIDS epidemic spread from gays to heterosexuals, while the Reagan administration refused to
mobilize against the disease. Another epidemic of the 1980s was the use of crack cocaine, which contributed to increased gang violence and murder rates.

B. Dissenters Push Back

The liberal and radical forces did not disappear during the 1980s. Many activists worked for social justice and there was increased activity in defense of the environment. Racial justice continued to loom as a major issue, as the Republican administration seemed to be trying to reverse the gains that people of color had made. The most important personality of left-leaning politics was the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who ran in the Democratic presidential primaries in 1984 and 1988. Gay rights activists fought against both AIDS and homophobic violence.

C. The New Immigration

Legislation in 1965 allowed more immigrants to enter the U.S. legally. A wave of new immigrants grew until in the 1980s, 6 million entered the country legally and about the same number arrived without documentation. These new immigrants brought an unprecedented cultural and ethnic diversity. Forty percent of these immigrants came from Asia and fifty percent came from Latin America, particularly Mexico, and the Caribbean. Recent immigrants came for a variety of reasons, most especially for economic opportunity. Willing to work hard for low wages, immigrants were an employer’s dream. Many conservatives began to fear that immigrants were changing American culture and that poor immigrants would wind up on welfare. In response, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was expelling 1.7 million undocumented workers a year by the 1990s.

IV. The End of the Cold War

A. From Cold War to Detente

In the 1980s, internal Soviet politics ended the Cold War, as Gorbachev reformed his system and cut back on military spending. Unable to control the forces he had unleashed, the Soviet Union began to fall apart. Once he was convinced of Gorbachev’s seriousness about reform and friendship with the United States, President Reagan moved away from his Cold War position and signed a number of important arms reduction treaties.
B. The Iran-Contra Scandal

Although successful with the Russians, Reagan suffered his worst foreign policy failure when he tried to get Iran to help free hostages held in Lebanon in return for secret arms sales. The profits from the arms sales would then be diverted to support the Contra army fighting the government in Nicaragua. While Oliver North, staff member of the National Security Council, called this a “neat idea,” it was also an illegal one. When caught, Reagan defended North but denied remembering anything about the illegal operation. By early 1987, 90 percent of Americans did not believe Reagan was telling all he knew. Still, his personal popularity continued.

C. A Global Police?

When George H. W. Bush was elected president over Democrat Michael Dukakis in 1988, it was a victory that rested on a vicious campaign based on symbols, like the Pledge of Allegiance, rather than on issues. Once he was president, Bush was careful; one of his most important actions was the appointment of Clarence Thomas, a right-wing African American, to the Supreme Court. As the Soviet Union dissolved, Bush’s only response was to urge Soviet citizens to move slowly.

Closer to home, Bush was less timid in his foreign policy. In December 1989, Bush had U.S. troops invade Panama and seize Manuel Noriega, that nation’s dictator and a former ally in the Contra war against Nicaragua. When, in 1990, Iraq invaded the small but oil-rich kingdom of Kuwait, Bush responded and three months later, Operation Desert Storm sent Iraqi troops in headlong retreat back across the border. Bush decided not to take over Iraq and remove its dictator, Saddam Hussein. The war proved the importance of controlling the media; Americans saw only safe photos of exact hits on military targets, but not those of Iraqi soldiers being slaughtered during their retreat. The war demonstrated U.S. power, but it also furthered the growth of anti-American sentiment among Islamic militants such as Osama bin Laden.

Identification

*Explain the significance of each of the following:*

1. Ayatollah Khomeini:

2. 1980 Olympics (Moscow):

3. John Anderson:

4. Contras:
5. “Reaganomics”:

6. “states’ rights”:

7. James Watt:

8. religious right:

9. Sandra Day O’Connor:

10. Chernobyl:

11. Jesse Jackson:

12. INS:

13. Gorbachev:

14. Iran-Contra scandal:

15. Oliver North:

16. National Security Council:

17. Willie Horton:

18. Clarence Thomas:
Multiple Choice Questions:

1. In 1979, the Shah of Iran fled his country when faced with
   A. invasion by the Soviet Union.
   B. assault by U.S.-led “Operation Desert Storm.”
   C. a popular uprising by his own people.
   D. attack by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.
   E. war with Jordan.

2. The Soviet Union sent troops into Afghanistan because it feared
   A. the fall of the pro-Soviet government there.
   B. Islamic extremism reaching into the USSR.
   C. instability on her border.
   D. all of the above.
   E. none of the above.

3. Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 in part because
   A. the Democrats nominated a Catholic.
   B. Jimmy Carter was so unpopular.
   C. his background as an actor allowed him to perform well on television.
   D. he was from the South.
   E. B and C only.

4. Between 1980 and 1984, under Reagan, the military budget
   A. grew 40 percent.
   B. increased only slightly.
   C. stayed about the same.
   D. actually declined in real dollar terms.
   E. none of the above.
5. In which of the following did the CIA help death squads kill insurgents?
   A. El Salvador
   B. Nicaragua
   C. Guatemala
   D. all of the above
   E. A and C only

6. Because of “Reaganomics,” the United States became the world’s largest
   A. democracy.
   B. debtor nation.
   C. creditor.
   D. exporter of Steel products.
   E. none of the above.

7. Who said “trees cause more pollution than automobiles do”?
   A. Ronald Reagan
   B. James Watt
   C. Jimmy Carter
   D. no one
   E. Walter Mondale

8. James Watt, Reagan’s first Secretary of the Interior, believed that there
   A. was a need to preserve the wilderness for future generations.
   B. existed too little public land for recreation.
   C. would soon be an end to the world.
   D. all of the above.
   E. none of the above.

9. By 1989, the top 1 percent of Americans possessed more assets than the
   A. bottom 90 percent.
   B. bottom 70 percent.
   C. bottom 50 percent.
   D. bottom 30 percent.
   E. bottom 15 percent.

10. Many working-class Americans voted for Ronald Reagan because they
    A. thought he would advance civil rights.
    B. liked his opposition to abortion, homosexuals, and affirmative action.
    C. personally benefited from his economic policies.
    D. knew he supported trade unions like PATCO.
    E. all of the above.
11. The Religious Right is disproportionately
A. southern Protestants.
B. urban Catholics.
C. Jewish.
D. members of the United Church of Christ.
E. none of the above.

12. An epidemic that swept through the U.S., hitting poor urban areas hardest, was
A. swine flu.
B. SWAT.
C. the use of crack cocaine.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

13. The most prominent face of left-leaning politics in the 1980s was
A. Jimmy Carter.
B. Jesse Jackson.
C. Oliver North.
D. Bob Dole
E. none of the above.

14. Most new immigrants to the United States from 1970 to 1990 were
A. seeking new economic opportunity.
B. from Latin America, Asia, or the Caribbean.
C. more willing than U.S. residents to work for low wages.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

15. When the Soviet Union began to collapse in 1990 and 1991, President Bush
A. urged Soviet citizens to move cautiously.
B. rejoiced at the fall of Soviet power.
C. asked Congress to pray for the Russians.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

MAP QUESTION:

After looking at Map 28.4, evaluate the importance of oil in motivating U.S. involvement in the Gulf War, 1990-1991.
CONNECTING HISTORY

Discuss the dilemma faced by those whose hard work brings material success B is this success ultimately corrupting? Why or why not?

INTERPRETING HISTORY

What is your evaluation of the critique of the moral majority given by Brown? Explain why you agree or disagree.

Answers to Multiple Choice Questions

1. C  
2. D  
3. E  
4. A  
5. D  
6. B  
7. A  
8. C  
9. A  
10. B  
11. A  
12. C  
13. B  
14. D  
15. A