

## LIMITS OF A SUPERPOWER, 1969–1980

*If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation, the United States, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.*

Richard Nixon, Address to the Nation, April 30, 1970

In 1969, television viewers around the world witnessed the astonishing sight of two American astronauts walking on the moon's surface. This event, followed by a series of other successes for the U.S. space program, represented some of the high points of the 1970s. Offsetting these technological triumphs, however, were shocking revelations about White House participation in the Watergate crime, a stagnant economy, and the fall of South Vietnam to communism. Increased foreign economic competition, oil shortages, rising unemployment, and high inflation made Americans aware that even the world's leading superpower would have to adjust to a fast-changing, less manageable world.

### **Richard Nixon's Foreign Policy**

In his January 1969 inaugural address, President Nixon promised to bring Americans together after the turmoil of the 1960s. However, suspicious and secretive by nature, Nixon soon began to isolate himself in the White House and create what Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called an "imperial presidency." Nixon's first interest was international relations, not domestic policy. Together with his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger (who became secretary of state during Nixon's second term), Nixon fashioned a pragmatic foreign policy that reduced the tensions of the Cold War.

### **Vietnam**

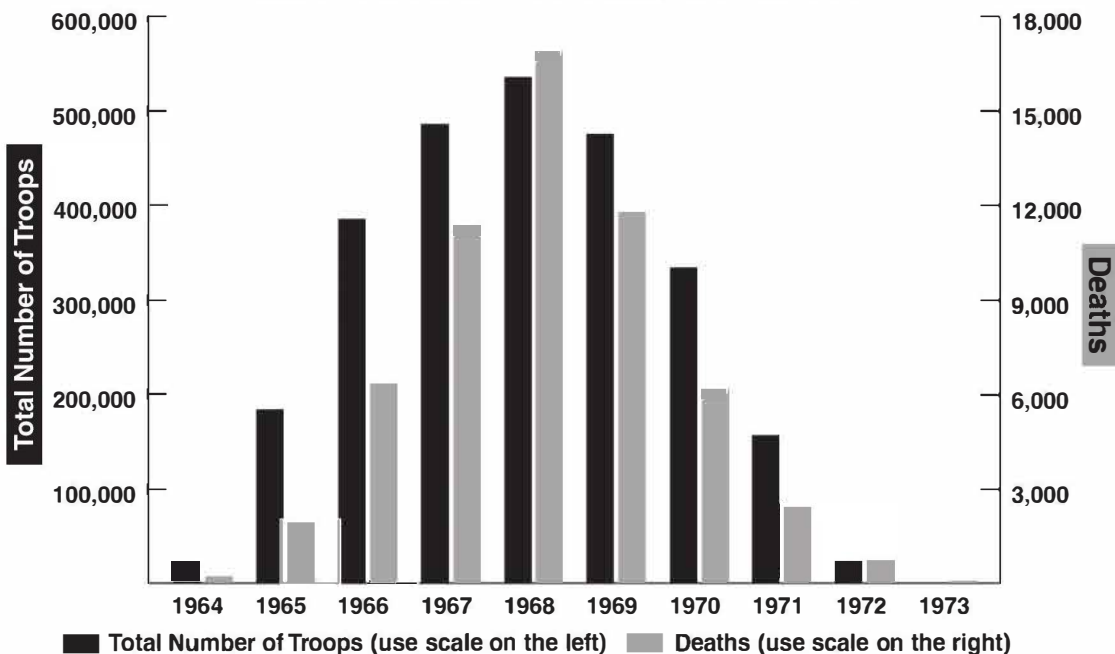
When Nixon took office, more than half a million U.S. troops were in Vietnam. His principal objective was to find a way to reduce U.S. involvement in the war while at the same time avoiding the appearance of conceding defeat. In a word, Nixon said the United States was seeking nothing less than "peace with honor."

**“Vietnamization.”** Almost immediately, the new president began the process called “Vietnamization.” He announced that he would gradually withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam and give the South Vietnamese the money, the weapons, and the training that they needed to take over the full conduct of the war. Under this policy, U.S. troops in South Vietnam went from over 540,000 in 1969 to under 30,000 in 1972. Extending the idea of disengagement to other parts of Asia, the president proclaimed the *Nixon Doctrine*, declaring that in the future Asian allies would receive U.S. support but without the extensive use of U.S. ground forces.

**Opposition to Nixon’s War Policies** Nixon’s gradual withdrawal of forces from Vietnam reduced the number of antiwar protests. However, in April 1970, the president expanded the war by using U.S. forces to invade Cambodia in an effort to destroy Vietnamese Communist bases in that country. A nationwide protest on college campuses against this action resulted in the killing of four youths by National Guard troops at Kent State in Ohio and two students at Jackson State in Mississippi. In reaction to the escalation of the war, the U.S. Senate (but not the House) voted to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

Also in 1970, the American public was shocked to learn about a 1968 massacre of women and children by U.S. troops in the Vietnamese village of My Lai. Further fueling the antiwar sentiment was the publication by the *New York Times* of the Pentagon Papers, a secret government history documenting the mistakes and deceptions of government policy-makers in dealing with Vietnam. The papers had been turned over, or “leaked,” to the press by Daniel Ellsberg, a former Defense Department analyst.

U.S. FORCES IN VIETNAM, 1964 to 1973



**Source:** U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. Vietnam Conflict Extract Data File and other sources.

**Peace Talks, Bombing Attacks, and Armistice** On the diplomatic front, Nixon had Kissinger conduct secret meetings with North Vietnam's foreign minister, Le Duc Tho. Kissinger announced in the fall of 1972 that "peace is at hand," but this announcement proved premature. When the two sides could not reach a deal, Nixon ordered a massive bombing of North Vietnam (the heaviest air attacks of the long war) to force a settlement. After several weeks of B-52 bomber attacks, the North Vietnamese agreed to an armistice, in which the United States would withdraw the last of its troops and get back over 500 prisoners of war (POWs). The Paris Accords of January 1973 also promised a cease-fire and free elections. In practice, however, the armistice did not end the war between the North and the South and left tens of thousands of enemy troops in South Vietnam. Before the war ended, the death toll probably numbered more than a million.

The armistice finally allowed the United States to extricate itself from a war that had claimed over 58,000 American lives. The \$118 billion spent on the war began an inflationary cycle that racked the U.S. economy for years afterward.

### ***Détente with China and the Soviet Union***

Nixon and Kissinger strengthened the U.S. position in the world by taking advantage of the rivalry between the two Communist giants, China and the Soviet Union. Their diplomacy was praised for bringing about *détente*—a deliberate reduction of Cold War tensions. Even after Watergate ended his presidency in disgrace, Nixon's critics would admit that his conduct of foreign affairs had enhanced world peace.

**Visit to China** Nixon knew that only an outspoken critic of communism like himself could take the bold step of improving relations with "Red" China (Mao Zedong's Communist regime) without being condemned as "soft" on communism. After a series of secret negotiations with Chinese leaders, Nixon astonished the world in February 1972 by traveling to Beijing to meet with Mao. His visit initiated diplomatic exchanges that ultimately led to U.S. recognition of the Communist government in 1979.

**Arms Control with the U.S.S.R.** Nixon used his new relationship with China to put pressure on the Soviets to agree to a treaty limiting antiballistic missiles (ABMs), a new technology that would have expanded the arms race. After the first round of Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT I), U.S. diplomats secured Soviet consent to a freeze on the number of ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads. While this agreement did not end the arms race, it was a significant step toward reducing Cold War tensions and bringing about *détente*.

### **Nixon's Domestic Policy**

Throughout the 1970s, the Democrats continued to hold majorities in both houses of Congress. The Republican president had to live with this reality and obtain some concessions from Congress through moderation and compromise. At the same time, Nixon laid the foundation for a shift in public opinion toward conservatism and for Republican gains that would challenge and overthrow the Democratic control of Congress in the 1980s and 1990s.

## ***The New Federalism***

Nixon tried to slow down the growth of Johnson's Great Society programs by proposing the Family Assistance Plan, which would have replaced welfare by providing a guaranteed annual income for working Americans. The Democratic majority in Congress easily defeated this initiative. The Republican president did succeed, however, in shifting some of the responsibility for social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. In a program known as revenue sharing, or the New Federalism, Congress approved giving local governments \$30 billion in block grants over five years to address local needs as they saw fit (instead of specific uses of federal money being controlled by Washington). Republicans hoped revenue sharing would check the growth of the federal government and return responsibility to the states, where it had rested before the New Deal.

Nixon attempted to bypass Congress by impounding (not spending) funds appropriated for social programs. Democrats protested that such action was an abuse of executive powers. The courts agreed with the president's critics, arguing that it was a president's duty to carry out the laws of Congress, whether or not the president agreed with them.

## ***Nixon's Economic Policies***

Starting with a recession in 1970, the U.S. economy throughout the 1970s faced the unusual combination of economic slowdown and high inflation—a condition referred to as *stagflation* (*stagnation plus inflation*). To slow inflation, Nixon at first tried to cut federal spending. However, when this policy contributed to a recession and unemployment, he adopted Keynesian economics and deficit spending so as not to alienate middle-class and blue-collar Americans. In August 1971, he surprised the nation by imposing a 90-day wage and price freeze. Next, he took the dollar off the gold standard, which helped to devalue it relative to foreign currencies. This action, combined with a 10 percent surtax on all imports, improved the U.S. balance of trade with foreign competitors.

By the election year of 1972, the recession was over. Also in that year, Congress approved automatic increases for Social Security benefits based on the annual rise in the cost of living. This measure protected seniors, the poor, and the disabled from the worst effects of inflation but also contributed to budget problems in the future. In 1972, Congress also passed Title IX, a statute to end sex discrimination in schools that receive federal funding. Though far-reaching, the law is best known for its requirement that schools provide girls with equal athletic opportunities. Many believe that these new opportunities in athletics proved to be a key step in promoting women's equality.

## ***Southern Strategy***

Having received just 43 percent of the popular vote in 1968, Nixon was well aware of being a minority president. He devised a political strategy to form a Republican majority by appealing to the millions of voters who had become disaffected by antiwar protests, black militants, school busing to achieve racial balance, and the excesses of the youth counterculture. Nixon referred to these

conservative Americans as the “silent majority.” Many of them were Democrats, including southern whites, northern Catholic blue-collar workers, and recent suburbanites who disagreed with the liberal drift of their party.

To win over the South, the president asked the federal courts in that region to delay integration plans and busing orders. He also nominated two southern conservatives (Clement Haynsworth and G. Harold Carswell) to the Supreme Court. Though the courts rejected his requests and the Senate refused to confirm the two nominees, his strategy played well with southern white voters. At the same time, Nixon authorized Vice President Spiro Agnew to make verbal assaults on war protesters and to attack the press as liberal.

### ***The Burger Court***

As liberal justices of the Supreme Court retired, Nixon replaced them with more conservative members. However, like other presidents, Nixon found that his appointees did not always rule as he had hoped. In 1969, after Chief Justice Earl Warren resigned, Nixon appointed Warren E. Burger of Minnesota to replace him. The Burger Court was more conservative than the Warren Court, but several of its major decisions angered conservatives. For example, in 1971 the court ordered busing to achieve racial balance in the schools, and in 1972 it issued strict guidelines that made carrying out the death penalty more difficult. The court’s most controversial ruling was *Roe v. Wade* (1973). In this 7–2 decision, the high court struck down many state laws prohibiting abortions as a violation of a women’s right to privacy. Finally, in the last days of Nixon’s Watergate agony (described later in this chapter), the court that he tried to shape denied his claims to executive privilege and ordered him to turn over the Watergate tapes (*United States v. Nixon*, 1974).

### ***The Election of 1972***

The success of Nixon’s southern strategy became evident in the presidential election of 1972 when the Republican ticket won majorities in every southern state. Nixon’s reelection was practically assured by (1) his foreign policy successes in China and the Soviet Union, (2) the removal of George Wallace from the race by an assassin’s bullet that paralyzed the Alabama populist, and (3) the nomination by the Democrats of a very liberal, antiwar, antiestablishment candidate, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota.

McGovern’s campaign quickly went off track. After some indecision, he dropped his vice presidential candidate, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, when it was discovered that he had undergone electroshock treatment for depression. On election day, Nixon overwhelmed McGovern in a landslide victory that carried every state but Massachusetts and won 61 percent of the popular vote. The Democrats still managed to keep control of both houses of Congress. Nevertheless, the voting patterns for Nixon indicated the start of a major political realignment of the Sunbelt and suburban voters, who were forming a new Republican majority. Nixon’s electoral triumph in 1972 made the Watergate revelations and scandals of 1973 all the more surprising.

## **Watergate**

The tragedy of Watergate went well beyond the public humiliation of Richard Nixon and the conviction and jailing of 26 White House officials and aides. Watergate had a paralyzing effect on the political system in the mid-1970s, a critical time both at home and overseas, when the country needed respected, strong, and confident leadership.

### ***White House Abuses***

In June 1972, a group of men hired by Nixon's reelection committee were caught breaking into the offices of the Democratic national headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. This break-in and attempted bugging were only part of a series of illegal activities and "dirty tricks" conducted by the Nixon administration and the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP).

Earlier, Nixon had ordered wiretaps on government employees and reporters to stop news leaks such as one that had exposed the secret bombing of Cambodia. The president's aides created a group, called the "plumbers," to stop leaks as well as to discredit opponents. Before Watergate, the "plumbers" had burglarized the office of psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, the person behind the leaking of the Pentagon Papers, in order to obtain information to discredit Ellsberg. The White House had also created an "enemies list" of prominent Americans who opposed Nixon, the Vietnam War, or both. People on this list were investigated by government agencies, such as the IRS. The illegal break-in at Watergate reflected the attitude in the Nixon administration that any means could be used to promote the national security—an objective that was often confused with protecting the Nixon administration from its critics.

### ***Watergate Investigation***

No solid proof demonstrated that President Nixon ordered any of these illegal activities. However, after months of investigation, it became clear that Nixon did engage in an illegal cover-up to avoid scandal. Tough sentencing of the Watergate burglars by federal judge John Sirica led to information about the use of money and a promise of pardons by the White House staff to keep the burglars quiet. A Senate investigating committee headed by Democrat Sam Ervin of North Carolina brought the abuses to the attention of Americans through televised hearings. A highlight of these hearings was the testimony of a White House lawyer, John Dean, who linked the president to the cover-up. Nixon's top aides, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, resigned to protect him and were later indicted, as were many others, for obstructing justice.

The discovery of a taping system in the Oval Office led to a year-long struggle between Nixon, who claimed executive privilege for the tapes, and investigators, who wanted the tapes to prove the cover-up charges.

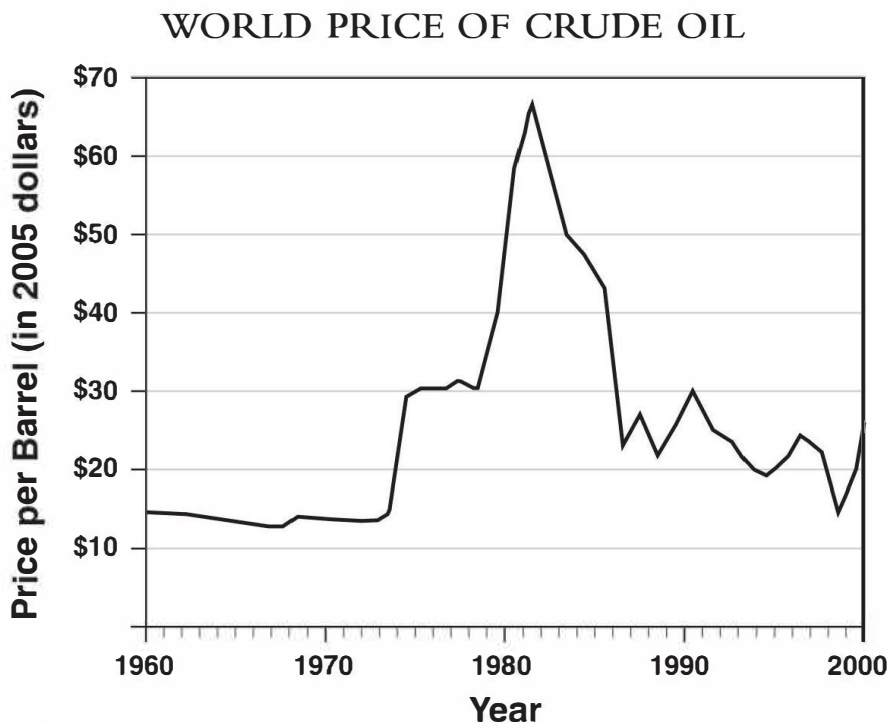
The Nixon administration received another blow in the fall of 1973, when Vice President Agnew had to resign because he had taken bribes when governor of Maryland. Replacing him was Michigan Representative Gerald Ford.

## Other Developments in 1973

Although the Watergate affair absorbed most of Nixon's attention during his shortened second term, important developments occurred at home and abroad.

**War Powers Act** Further discrediting Nixon was the news that he had authorized 3,500 secret bombing raids in Cambodia, a neutral country. Congress used the public uproar over this information to attempt to limit the president's powers over the military. In November 1973, after a long struggle, Congress finally passed the War Powers Act over Nixon's veto. This law required Nixon and any future president to report to Congress within 48 hours after taking military action. It further provided that Congress would have to approve any military action that lasted more than 60 days.

**October War and Oil Embargo** In world politics, the most important event of 1973 was the outbreak of another Middle Eastern war. On October 6, on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, the Syrians and Egyptians launched a surprise attack on Israel in an attempt to recover the lands lost in the Six-Day War of 1967. President Nixon ordered the U.S. nuclear forces on alert and airlifted almost \$2 billion in arms to Israel to stem their retreat. The tide of battle quickly shifted in favor of the Israelis, and the war was soon over.



Source: U.S. Energy Administration

The United States was made to pay a huge price for supporting Israel. The Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) placed an embargo on oil sold to Israel's supporters. The embargo caused a worldwide oil shortage and long lines at gas stations in the United States. Even worse was the impact on the U.S. economy, which now suffered from runaway

inflation, the loss of manufacturing jobs, and a lower standard of living for blue-collar workers. Consumers switched from big American-made cars to smaller, more fuel-efficient Japanese cars, which cost U.S. automobile workers over 225,000 jobs. Congress responded by enacting a 55-miles-per-hour speed limit to save gasoline and approving construction of a controversial oil pipeline to tap American oil reserves in Alaska. No government program, however, seemed to bolster the sluggish economy or stem high inflation rates, which continued to the end of the decade.

### ***Resignation of a President***

In 1974, Nixon made triumphal visits to Moscow and Cairo, but at home his reputation continued to slide. In October 1973, the president appeared to be interfering with the Watergate investigation when he fired Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor assigned to the case. In protest, the U.S. attorney general resigned. The House of Representatives began impeachment hearings, which caused Nixon to reveal transcripts of some of the Watergate tapes in April 1974. Still, it took a Supreme Court decision in July to force him to turn over the tapes to the courts and Congress. Included on one tape made just days after the Watergate burglary was an 18 ½-minute gap that had been erased. Meanwhile, the House Judiciary Committee voted three articles of impeachment: (1) obstruction of justice, (2) abuse of power, and (3) contempt of Congress.

The conversations recorded on the tapes shocked friends and foes alike. The transcript of one such White House conversation clearly implicated Nixon in the cover-up only days after the Watergate break-in. Faced with certain impeachment in the House and a trial in the Senate, Richard Nixon chose to resign on August 9, 1974. Vice President Gerald Ford then took the oath of office as the first unelected president in U.S. history.

**Significance** To some, the final outcome of the Watergate scandal (Nixon leaving office under pressure) proved that the U.S. constitutional system of checks and balances worked as it was intended. For others, the scandal underlined the dangerous shift of power to the presidency that began with Franklin Roosevelt and had been expanded during the Cold War. Without a doubt, Watergate contributed to a growing loss of faith in the federal government.

### **Gerald Ford in the White House**

Before Nixon chose him to replace Vice President Agnew in 1973, Gerald Ford had served in Congress for years as a representative from Michigan and as the Republican minority leader of the House. Ford was a likeable and unpretentious man, but many questioned his ability to be president.

### ***Pardoning of Nixon***

In his first month in office, President Ford lost the goodwill of many by granting Nixon a full and unconditional pardon for any crime that he might have committed. The pardon was extended even before any formal charges or indictment had been made by a court of law. Ford was accused of making a “corrupt



bargain” with Nixon, but he explained that the purpose of the pardon was to end the “national nightmare,” instead of prolonging it for months, if not years. Critics were angered that the full truth of Nixon’s deeds never came out.

### ***Investigating the CIA***

During Ford’s presidency (1974–1977), the Democratic Congress continued to search for abuses in the executive branch, especially in the CIA. This intelligence agency was accused of engineering the assassination of foreign leaders, among them the Marxist president of Chile, Salvador Allende. Ford appointed former Texas Congressman George H. W. Bush to reform the agency.

### ***Failure of U.S. Policy in Southeast Asia***

President Ford was unable to get additional funds from Congress for the South Vietnamese, who in 1974 were facing strong attack from Communist forces.

**Fall of Saigon** In April 1975, the U.S.-supported government in Saigon fell to the enemy, and Vietnam became one country under the rule of the Communist government in Hanoi (North Vietnam’s capital). Just before the final collapse, the United States was able to evacuate about 150,000 Vietnamese who had supported the United States and now faced certain persecution. The fall of South Vietnam marked a low point of American prestige overseas and confidence at home.

**Genocide in Cambodia** Also in 1975, the U.S.-supported government in Vietnam’s neighbor, Cambodia, fell to the Khmer Rouge, a radical Communist faction that killed over a million of its own people in a brutal relocation program to rid the country of western influence. Together the wars in Southeast Asia created 10 million refugees, many of whom fled to the United States.

**Future of Southeast Asia** The fall of Cambodia seemed to fulfill Eisenhower’s domino theory, but in fact the rest of Southeast Asia did not fall to communism. Instead, nations such as Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia emerged as the “little tigers” of the vigorously growing Asian (Pacific Rim) economy. Some argued that U.S. support of South Vietnam was not a waste, because it bought time for other nations of East Asia and Southeast Asia to develop and better resist communism.

### ***The Economy and Domestic Policy***

On domestic matters, Ford proved less accommodating and more conservative than Nixon. His chief concern was bringing inflation under control. He urged voluntary measures on the part of businesses and consumers, including the wearing of WIN buttons (Whip Inflation Now). Not only did inflation continue, but the economy also sank deeper into recession, with the unemployment rate reaching more than 9 percent. Ford finally agreed to a Democratic package to stimulate the economy, but he vetoed 39 other Democratic bills.

**Bicentennial Celebration** In 1976, the United States celebrated its 200th birthday. Americans’ pride in their history helped to put Watergate and Vietnam behind them. Even the lackluster presidency of Gerald Ford served the purpose of restoring candor and humility to the White House.

## ***The Election of 1976***

Watergate still cast its gloom over the Republican party in the 1976 elections. President Ford was challenged for the party's nomination by Ronald Reagan, a former actor and ex-governor of California, who enjoyed the support of the more conservative Republicans. Ford won the nomination in a close battle, but the conflict with Reagan hurt him in the polls.

**Emergence of Jimmy Carter** A number of Democrats competed for their party's nomination, including a little-known former governor of Georgia, James Earl (Jimmy) Carter. With Watergate still on voters' minds, Carter had success running as an outsider against the corruption in Washington. His victories in open primaries reduced the influence of more experienced Democratic politicians. After watching his huge lead in the polls evaporate in the closing days of the campaign, Carter managed to win a close election (287 electoral votes to 241 for Ford) by carrying most of the South and getting an estimated 97 percent of the African American vote. In the aftermath of Watergate, the Democrats also won strong majorities in both houses of Congress.

## **Jimmy Carter's Presidency**

The informal style of Jimmy Carter signaled an effort to end the imperial presidency. On his inaugural day, he walked down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House instead of riding in the presidential limousine. Public images of the president carrying his own luggage may have impressed average Americans. However, veteran members of Congress always viewed Carter as an outsider who depended too much on his politically inexperienced advisers from Georgia. Even Carter's keen intelligence and dedication to duty may have been partly a liability in causing him to pay close attention to all the details of government operations. Critics observed that, when it came to distinguishing between the forest and the trees, Carter was a "leaf man."

## ***Foreign Policy***

The hallmark of Carter's foreign policy was human rights, which he preached with Wilsonian fervor to the world's dictators.

**Human Rights Diplomacy** Carter appointed Andrew Young, an African American, to serve as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Carter and Young championed the cause of human rights around the world, especially by opposing the oppression of the black majority in South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) by all-white governments. In Latin America, human rights violations by the military governments of Argentina and Chile caused Carter to cut off U.S. aid to those countries.

**Panama Canal** The Carter administration attempted to correct inequities in the original Panama Canal Treaty of 1903 by negotiating a new treaty. In 1978, after long debate, the Senate ratified a treaty that would gradually transfer operation and control of the Panama Canal from the United States to the Panamanians, a process to be completed by the year 2000. Opponents would remember Carter's "giveaway" of the canal in the 1980 election.

**Camp David Accords (1978)** Perhaps Carter's single greatest achievement as president was arranging a peace settlement between Egypt and Israel. In 1977, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat took the first courageous step toward Middle East peace by visiting Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in Jerusalem. President Carter followed this bold initiative by inviting Sadat and Begin to meet again at the presidential retreat in Camp David, Maryland. With Carter acting as an intermediary, the two leaders negotiated the Camp David Accords (September 1978), which provided a framework for a peace settlement between their countries.

Later, as a result of a peace treaty concluded in 1979, Egypt became the first Arab nation to recognize the nation of Israel. In return, Israel withdrew its troops from the Sinai territory taken from Egypt in the Six-Day War of 1967. The treaty was opposed by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and most of the Arab world, but it proved the first step in the long road to a negotiated peace in the Middle East.

**Iran and the Hostage Crisis** The Middle East provided Carter's greatest frustration. In Iran, anti-American sentiment had been strong since the United States had helped overthrow the country's democratically elected leader in 1953 and install a dictatorial government. In 1979, Islamic fundamentalists in Iran, led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, overthrew the shah who was then leading the Iranian government. The shah had kept the oil flowing for the West during the 1970s, but his autocratic rule and policy of westernization had alienated a large part of the Iranian population.

With the ayatollah and fundamentalists in power, Iranian oil production ground to a halt, causing the second worldwide oil shortage of the decade and another round of price increases. U.S. impotence in dealing with the crisis became more evident in November 1979 when Iranian militants seized the U.S. embassy in Teheran and held more than 50 members of the American staff as prisoners and hostages. The hostage crisis dragged out through the remainder of Carter's presidency. In April 1980, Carter approved a rescue mission, but the breakdown of the helicopters over the Iranian desert forced the United States to abort the mission. For many Americans, Carter's unsuccessful attempts to free the hostages became a symbol of a failed presidency.

**Cold War** President Carter attempted to continue the Nixon-Ford policy of détente with China and the Soviet Union. In 1979, the United States ended its official recognition of the Nationalist Chinese government of Taiwan and completed the first exchange of ambassadors with the People's Republic of China. At first, détente also moved ahead with the Soviet Union with the signing in 1979 of a SALT II treaty, which provided for limiting the size of each superpower's nuclear delivery system. The Senate never ratified the treaty, however, as a result of a renewal of Cold War tensions over Afghanistan.

In December 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan—an aggressive action that ended a decade of improving U.S.-Soviet relations. The United States feared that the invasion might lead to a Soviet move to control the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Carter reacted by (1) placing an embargo on grain exports

and the sale of high technology to the Soviet Union, and (2) boycotting the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. After having campaigned for arms reduction, Carter now had to switch to an arms buildup.

### ***Domestic Policy: Dealing with Inflation***

At home, the biggest issue was the growing inflation rate. At first Carter tried to check inflation with measures aimed at conserving oil energy and reviving the U.S. coal industry. However, the compromises that came out of Congress failed either to reduce the consumption of oil or to check inflation. In 1979–1980, inflation seemed completely out of control and reached the unheard of rate of 13 percent.

**Troubled Economy** Inflation slowed economic growth as consumers and businesses could no longer afford the high interest rates that came with high prices. The chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Paul Volcker, hoped to break the back of inflation by pushing interest rates even higher, to 20 percent in 1980. These rates especially hurt the automobile and building industries, which laid off tens of thousands of workers. Inflation also pushed middle-class taxpayers into higher tax brackets, which led to a “taxpayers’ revolt.” Government social programs that were indexed to the inflation rate helped to push the federal deficit to nearly \$60 billion in 1980. Many Americans had to adjust to the harsh truth that, for the first time since World War II, their standard of living was on the decline.

### ***Loss of Popularity***

The Iranian hostage crisis and worsening economic crisis hurt Carter in the opinion polls. In 1979, in what the press called Carter’s “national malaise” speech, he blamed the problems of the United States on a “moral and spiritual crisis” of the American people. By that time, however, many Americans blamed the president for weak and indecisive leadership. By the election year 1980 his approval rating had fallen to only 23 percent. In seeking a second term, the unpopular president was clearly vulnerable to political challenges from both Democrats and Republicans.

### ***American Society in Transition***

Social changes in the 1970s were of potentially even greater significance than politics. By the end of the decade, for the first time, half of all Americans lived in the fastest-growing sections of the country—the South and the West. Unlike the previous decade, which was dominated by the youth revolt, Americans were conscious in the seventies that the population was aging. The fastest growing age group consisted of senior citizens over 65.

The country’s racial and ethnic composition was also changing noticeably in the late 20th century. By 1990, minority groups made up 25 percent of the population. The Census Bureau predicted that, by 2050, as much as half the population would be Hispanic American, African American, or Asian

American. Cultural pluralism was replacing the melting pot as the model for U.S. society, as diverse ethnic and cultural groups strove not only to end discrimination and improve their lives, but also to celebrate their unique traditions.

### ***Growth of Immigration***

Before the 1960s, most immigrants to the United States had come from Europe and Canada. By the 1980s, 47 percent of immigrants came from Latin America, 37 percent from Asia, and less than 13 percent from Europe and Canada. In part, this dramatic shift was caused by the arrival of refugees leaving Cuba and Vietnam after the Communist takeovers of these countries. Of far greater importance was the impact of the Immigration Act of 1965, which ended the ethnic quota acts of the 1920s favoring Europeans and thereby opened the United States to immigrants from all parts of the world.

**Undocumented Immigrants** How many immigrants entered the United States illegally every year could only be estimated, but by the mid-1970s, as many as 12 million foreigners were in the U.S. illegally. The rise in immigrants from countries of Latin America and Asia led to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which penalized employers for hiring immigrants who had entered the country illegally or had overstayed their visas, while also granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants arriving by 1982. Even so, many Americans concluded that the nation had lost control of its own borders, as both legal and undocumented immigrants continued to flock to the United States at an estimated million persons a year.

### ***Demands for Minority Rights***

One aspect of the protest movements of the 1960s that continued into later decades was the movement by a variety of minorities to gain both relief from discrimination and recognition for their contributions to U.S. society.

**Hispanic Americans** Most Hispanic Americans before World War II lived in the southwestern states, but in the postwar years new arrivals from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and South and Central America increasingly settled in the East and Midwest. Mexican workers, after suffering deportation during the Great Depression, returned to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s to take low-paying agricultural jobs. They were widely exploited before a long series of boycotts led by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Organization finally gained collective bargaining rights for farm workers in 1975. Mexican American activists also won a federal mandate for bilingual education requiring schools to teach Hispanic children in both English and Spanish. In the 1980s, a growing number of Hispanic Americans were elected to public office, including as mayors of Miami, San Antonio, and other large cities. The Census Bureau reported that, in 2000, Hispanics, including Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latin Americans, had become the country's largest minority group.

**American Indian Movement** In the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration had made an unsuccessful attempt to encourage American Indians to leave reservations and assimilate into urban America. American Indian leaders resisted the loss of cultural identity that would have resulted from such a policy. To achieve self-determination and revival of tribal traditions, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in 1968. Militant actions soon followed, including AIM's takeover of the abandoned prison on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay in 1969. AIM members also occupied Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973, site of the infamous massacre of American Indians by the U.S. cavalry in 1890.

American Indians had a number of successes in both Congress and the courts. Congress' passage of the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975 gave reservations and tribal lands greater control over internal programs, education, and law enforcement. American Indians also used the federal courts successfully to regain property or compensation for treaty violations. They attacked widespread unemployment and poverty on reservations by improving education, through the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978, and by building industries and gambling casinos on reservations, under the self-determination legislation. Interest in the cultural heritage of American Indians was also overcoming old prejudices. By the 2010 census, nearly three million people identified themselves as American Indian or Alaska Native, and over two million more identified themselves as a combination of American Indian or Alaska Native and some other ethnic group.

American Indian Population of the United States, 1950 to 2010		
Year	Total	Percentage
1950	343,410	0.2
1960	508,675	0.3
1970	827,255	0.4
1980	1,420,400	0.6
1990	1,959,234	0.8
2000	2,475,956	0.9
2010	2,932,248	0.9

Figures include Alaska Natives  
**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau

**Asian Americans** Americans of Asian descent had become the fastest growing ethnic minority by the 1980s. The largest group of Asian Americans were of Chinese ancestry, followed by Filipinos, Japanese, Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese. A strong dedication to education resulted in Asian Americans being well represented in the best colleges and universities. However, at times, Asian Americans suffered from discrimination, envy, and Japan-bashing, while the less educated immigrants earned well below the national average.

**Gay Liberation Movement** In 1969, a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City, sparked both a riot and the gay rights movement. Gay activists urged homosexuals to be open about their identity and to work to end discrimination and violent abuse. By the mid-1970s, homosexuality was no longer classified as a mental illness and the federal Civil Service dropped its ban on employment of homosexuals. In 1993, President Clinton attempted to end discrimination against gays and lesbians in the military, but settled for the compromise “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. People would not be asked or expected to describe their sexual identity, but the military could still expel people for being gay or lesbian.

### ***The Environmental Movement***

While the Progressive era conservation movement was fairly small and led by politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt, the modern environmental movement had wide spread popular support. The participation of 20 million citizens in the first Earth Day in 1970 reflected the nation’s growing concerns over air and water pollution and the destruction of the natural environment, including wildlife. Media coverage of industrial disasters increased public questioning of the benefits of industry and new technologies, in what some called a “post-modern” culture. Massive oil spills around the world, from off the coast of Santa Barbara California in 1969 to the *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker accident in Alaska in 1989, reinforced fears about the deadly combination of human error and modern technology. Public opinion also turned against building additional nuclear power plants after an accident at the Three Mile Island power plant in Pennsylvania (1979) and the deadly explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in the Soviet Union (1986).

**Protective Legislation** The environmental movement borrowed tactics from other protest movements to secure legislation to stop pollution and destruction of nature. In 1970, Congress passed the Clean Air Act and created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and followed this legislation in 1972 with the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. In 1980, the Superfund was created to clean up toxic dumps, such as Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York. These laws regulated toxic substances, public drinking water systems, dumping of waste, and protected natural environments and wildlife, such as the American bald eagle. In the 1980s, the backlash from business and industry would try to reverse the impact of this legislation.

## Conservative Shift

The protest movements by diverse groups in American society seemed to produce more social stress and fragmentation. Combined with a slowing economy and a declining standard of living, these forces left many Americans feeling angry and bitter. A conservative reaction to the liberal policies of the New Deal and the Great Society was gaining strength in the late 1970s and would prove a powerful force in the politics of the next decade.

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: END OF THE IMPERIAL PRESIDENCY?

The Cold War, and the Vietnam War in particular, caused critics in the 1970s to fear the expansion and abuse of power by presidents. They saw parallels between the decline of the Roman Republic and the rise of the powerful emperor system of the Roman Empire during Rome's expansion, and the developments in the political system of the United States during its emergence as a superpower after World War II. The actions of Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandals confirmed many Americans' fears.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued in his book *The Imperial Presidency* (1973) that the United States' exercise of world leadership had gradually undermined the original intent of the Constitution and the war powers of Congress. Cold War presidents had used national security, the need for secrecy, executive privilege, and the mystique of the high office to concentrate power into the White House. The end of the Vietnam War, the resignation of Richard Nixon, and the War Powers Act of 1973 seemed to end the dangers of the imperial presidency. Presidents Ford and Carter proved comparatively weak presidents, and power had seemed to shift back to the Congress, as the Founders had intended.

Schlesinger concluded that the U.S. would continue to need a strong president, but one working within the limits of the Constitution. The issue of the proper constitutional limits on presidential powers reemerged after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. What are the constitutional limits on presidential powers to fight terrorists given invasive reach of the newest electronic and military technologies?



## KEY TERMS BY THEME

### **Nixon Foreign Policy (WOR)**

Henry Kissinger  
Vietnamization  
Nixon Doctrine  
Kent State  
My Lai  
Pentagon Papers  
Paris Accords of 1973  
détente  
China visit  
antiballistic missiles  
Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT)  
Middle East War (1973)  
OPEC; oil embargo

### **Nixon Domestic Policy (POL)**

New Federalism  
stagflation  
southern strategy  
wage and price controls  
off the gold standard  
cost of living indexed  
Title IX  
Burger Court  
*Roe v. Wade* (1973)  
election of 1972  
George McGovern  
Watergate cover-up  
“plumbers”  
“enemies list”  
*United States v. Nixon*  
War Powers Act (1973)  
impeachment and  
resignation  
“imperial presidency”

### **Ford Presidency (POL, WOR)**

Gerald Ford  
pardon of Nixon  
reform of CIA  
fall of Saigon  
Cambodia genocide  
battle over inflation  
Bicentennial  
election of 1976

### **Carter Presidency (WOR, POL)**

James Earl (Jimmy)  
Carter  
human rights  
Panama Canal Treaty  
(1978)  
Camp David Accords  
(1978)  
Iranian hostage crisis  
recognition of China  
Soviet Afghanistan  
invasion  
Paul Volcker, high interest rates  
“malaise” speech

### **American Identities (NAT, PEO)**

cultural pluralism  
impact of 1965 immigration law  
Immigration Reform and Control Act (1986)  
Hispanic Americans  
Cesar Chavez  
American Indian Movement  
Indian Self-Determination Act (1975)  
gaming casinos  
Asian Americans  
gay liberation movement

### **Environmental Movement (GEO)**

Earth Day (1970)  
*Exxon Valdez* accident  
Three Mile Island  
Chernobyl meltdown  
Clean Air Act (1970)  
Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)  
Clean Water Act (1972)  
Environmental Superfund (1980)  
Endangered Species Act (1973)