CHAPTER 39

The Resurgence of Conservatism, 1980–1992

# focus questions

1. What were the domestic goals of the Reagan administration, and was he successful in achieving those goals in his two terms as president?

2. What were the causes for the rise of the New Right?

. What was Reagan’s legacy, in domestic policy and in foreign policy?

. How was the New Right influential in both religion and the Supreme Court?

. What were the major issues faced by George H.W. Bush in his administration?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Leading a conservative movement to power in Washington, Ronald Reagan vigorously pursued new right economic and social policies. Under Reagan and his successor George Bush, these policies brought both economic growth and massive budget deficits that put severe constraints on the federal government.

**Theme:** Religion pervaded American politics in the 1980s; especially conspicuous was a coalition of conservative, evangelical Christians known as the religious right—led by Jerry Falwell, an evangelical from Virginia. An organization called the Moral Majority rose to oppose what they viewed as the moral deterioration of American values.

**Theme:** The early 1980s saw a revival of Cold War confrontation, but the decade ended with the collapse of Communism, first in Eastern Europe and then in the Soviet Union itself. With the end of the Cold War and the U.S.-led victory over Iraq in the Persian Gulf War, America remained the world’s only superpower. A series of relatively small military interventions in the Caribbean, and later in Africa and the Balkans, raised questions about the proper use of American force in the underdeveloped world.

# chapter summary

Reagan led Republicans to sweeping victories in 1980 and 1984 over divided and demoralized Democrats. Riding a conservative national tide, Reagan pushed both his supply-side economic program of lower taxes and the new-right social policies, especially opposition to affirmative action, abortion, and drugs. These policies brought economic recovery and lower inflation, as well as record budget deficits that severely restricted big government.

The Supreme Court under Reagan and his successor, George Bush, became increasingly conservative, while the confirmation hearings of Justice Clarence Thomas highlighted issues of sexual harassment.

Reagan revived the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union and engaged the United States in assertive military support for antileftist forces in Latin America and elsewhere. The ratcheting up of military spending, along with the attempted reforms led by Mikhail Gorbachev, contributed to the unraveling of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989–1991. With America as the only remaining superpower, George Bush led an international coalition to victory in the Persian Gulf War, but the Middle East remained a dangerous tinderbox despite new efforts to resolve the Israel-Arab conflict.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Describe the rise of conservatism in the 1980s. Explain Reagan’s unique ability to link economic, social-policy, and foreign-policy conservative principles into a potent political coalition. Discuss the successes and failures of Reagan’s supply-side economics, as well as the ideological polarization of America’s culture wars.

REFERENCE: William C. Berman, *America’s Right Turn: From Nixon to Bush* (1994).

* Explain the revival of the Cold War in the 1980s. Examine the relation between American policies and the internal changes within the Soviet bloc, culminating in the collapse of Communism, the reunification of Germany, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Include consideration of the new problems for the United States created by the breakup of Communism in places such as the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia.

REFERENCE: Theodore Draper, *The Devil We Knew: Americans and the Cold War* (1993).

* Examine the increasing importance of religion in American politics and culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Include consideration of the religious right and evangelical movements, as well as other religious voices such as those of the Catholic Church, the black churches, and rapidly growing religious groups such as American Muslims and Buddhists affiliated with the immigration boom of the period.

REFERENCES: Garry Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (1990); James Davidson Hunger, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991).

* Explore the rise of the Conservative right, how it seized political power and maintained it throughout the 1980s and the consequences that followed it.

REFERENCE: Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (2008).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on Reagan as personality and political leader. Discuss why his personal popularity seemed to transcend his politically controversial policies, and what legacy he left to the Republican Party and American politics generally. (See boxed quotes by Reagan on pages 935, 942, and 946.)
* Examine the growing role of women and women’s issues in the politics of the 1980s and 1990s. Consider the increasing impact of women in public and political life, perhaps by examining the careers of prominent figures such as Sandra Day O’Connor, Dianne Feinstein, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.
* Discuss the new importance of the Third World in American foreign policy of the 1980s and 1990s. The involvement of the United States in the underdeveloped world can be considered in relation to both military issues (for example, the Latin American civil wars of the 1980s and the Persian Gulf War), as well as economic issues involving NAFTA and trade with countries such as Mexico and China.
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as America Is Facing a Crisis of Confidence and The End of the Cold War Marked a Great Triumph for the U.S. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Show students the following video: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume VI: 1981–1989: A New World*. “Cold War tensions escalate until a new Soviet leader suddenly dissolves the long-standing Communist rule in Eastern Bloc countries, and the word ‘glasnost’ is the international mantra of the era. At home, another G-word changes lives and fortunes when the Guru of Greek, Ivan Boesky, preaches the gospel of guiltless profitmaking.”
* Have students listen to Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” Have students compete to try and see who knows the most references to the words in the song. A great website with a PowerPoint presentation of the song, complete with images, is http://yeli.us/Flash/Fire.html (last accessed September 2014).
* Have the students read Richard Rorty’s “Science as Solidarity” (1986) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students investigate the rise of the Conservative movement in Ronald Story and Bruce Laurie, *The Rise of Conservatism in America, 1945–2000: A Brief History with Documents* (2008).
* Have the students read the speeches and writings of Reagan. The American Presidency Project (http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/, last accessed September 2014).

# character sketches

## Edward Kennedy (1932–2009)

Kennedy is a Massachusetts senator and heir to the Kennedy legacy in American politics.

The ninth child and fourth son of the family, Kennedy was indulged by his father and not pushed into competitive activities as the older children had been.

In his freshman year at Harvard, Kennedy was expelled for having someone else take a Spanish exam for him. He later returned to graduate from Harvard and the University of Virginia Law School.

His first run for the Senate came in 1962, only a few days after his thirtieth birthday, and provoked much criticism. But he conducted a successful campaign with the slogan “He can do more for Massachusetts.”

The 1969 accident at Chappaquiddick Island, in which a young woman drowned, has remained Kennedy’s greatest political liability. He was most sharply criticized not for the accident, but for his failure to report it until the next morning and for his unconvincing explanations of the events surrounding it.

**Quote:** “I understand that people feel strongly about me, as they felt about my brothers before me.… [Some] people have been enthusiastic supporters, and others have been harsh critics. I would expect that to be the case as long as I’m in public life.” (1974)

REFERENCE: James MacGregor Burns, *Edward Kennedy and the Camelot Legacy* (1976).

## Ronald Reagan (1911–2004)

The oldest president before Reagan was Eisenhower, who was about seventy when he left office; Reagan was that age when he first took office.

Reagan’s unemployed father worked for a time for Roosevelt’s WPA program. As a youthful lifeguard, Reagan saved over seventy people from drowning, and he was amazed that many of them later criticized him and claimed that they had not been in danger.

His break into movies came in 1937, when Warner Brothers signed him to a seven-year contract for $200 a week. In the movie *King’s Row* (1941), he played an amputee who said, “Where’s the rest of me?” Reagan used this line as the title of his 1965 autobiography.

His involvement with many liberal causes continued until the late 1940s, when he took the lead in driving communists from the Screen Actors Guild. His second marriage, to the daughter of a politically conservative doctor, also helped turn him into a staunch conservative.

Reagan first won national political attention for a speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater in 1964. His first try for the presidency came in 1968, when he lost the nomination to Nixon.

**Quote:** “Either we accept the responsibility for our own destiny, or we abandon the American Revolution and confess that an intellectual belief in a far-distant capital can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them for ourselves. You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We can preserve for our children this last best hope of man on earth or we can sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness.” (1964)

REFERENCE: Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (1992).

## Sandra Day O’Connor (1930– )

O’Connor is the Arizona judge who became the first woman U.S. Supreme Court justice.

Her childhood was spent on a ranch in Arizona. At Stanford Law School, Chief Justice William Rehnquist was first in her law class, and she was third.

She served as an assistant attorney general and was elected to two terms in the Arizona state senate, where she became majority leader. A Democratic governor appointed her to the state appeals court in 1979.

In her early days on the Supreme Court, O’Connor was considered a conservative who almost always followed the lead of Justices Rehnquist and Powell. She showed an independent streak, however, in breaking with them on some civil rights and civil liberties issues. She also began as a strong critic of the *Roe* v. *Wade* abortion decision and was widely expected to join other Reagan-Bush appointees in a new majority to overturn it. But in *Casey* v. *Planned Parenthood* and other decisions, O’Connor sided with two other justices (David Souter and Anthony Kennedy) in upholding *Roe,* while accepting various state restrictions on abortion. In the 1990s, O’Connor was usually the key swing vote on the Court, especially on issues of affirmative action and abortion.

**Quote:** “Our decisions…establish that the party seeking to uphold a statute that classifies individuals on the basis of their gender must carry the burden of showing an ‘exceedingly persuasive justification’ for the classification.… That this statute discriminates against males rather than females does not exempt it from scrutiny or reduce the standard of review.” (Opinion in *Mississippi University for Women* v. *Hogan,* 1982)

REFERENCE: Vincent Blasi, ed., *The Burger Court* (1983).

## George Herbert Walker Bush (1924– )

George Bush is the longtime Republican politician who won the presidency as Ronald Reagan’s successor in 1988 but lost his bid for reelection in 1992.

Bush is the son of wealthy Connecticut senator Prescott Bush. His private-school and Ivy League education at Yale were long seen as political handicaps, but he counteracted them by emphasizing his World War II service in the navy and such down-home pursuits as eating pork rinds and pitching horseshoes.

During Bush’s youthful oil-business career, and his two terms in Congress as a representative from the Houston area, he formed strong alliances with the Texas business community. An associate from those days, James Baker, became his closest political ally and later served as his secretary of state.

Bush held a long series of appointed positions—chairman of the Republican Party, head of the CIA, ambassador to China—before becoming Reagan’s vice president. Bush’s extensive foreign-policy experience led him to focus his administration on international rather than domestic affairs, at considerable political cost. In the 1988 election and afterward, Bush denied any knowledge or involvement in the Iran-Contra affair, although other Reagan officials, among them George Schulz and Caspar Weinberger, maintained that Bush was not “out of the loop.”

After his defeat in 1992, Bush retired to Texas. His son, George Bush Jr., was elected governor of Texas in 1994 and president in 2000.

**Quote:** “We are not the sum of our possessions. They are not the measure of our lives. In our hearts we know what matters. We must give [our children] a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home, neighborhood, and town better than he found it.” (Inaugural address, 1989)

REFERENCES: Peter Golman and Tom Matthew, *The Quest for the Presidency, 1988* (1989); Bill Minutaglio, *First Son: George W. Bush and the Bush Family Dynasty* (1999).

# questions for class discussion

. To what extent was the election of Reagan an endorsement of his conservative ideology, and to what extent was it a repudiation of the perceived failures of federal government policies in the stalemated 1970s?

. In what ways might the 1980s and early 1990s be compared with the 1920s in economic, social, and foreign policies? Did the economic boom of each period represent a genuine revival of American innovation, or was it fundamentally marred by the growing gap between rich and poor? (See boxed quote on page 946.)

. What were the successes and failures of American foreign policy in the post–Cold War era? Was the use of American military power in the Persian Gulf War and the Balkans a model for how American power could be effectively brought to bear, or did it demonstrate the limits of even the sole superpower’s ability to resolve regional conflicts?

. What was the real cause of the end of the Cold War? Did America win the Cold War, or did the Soviets lose the Cold War? Is there a difference? (See boxed quotes on page 949.)

. Compare and contrast the rise of the Moral Majority in the 1980s with that of the Beats of the 1950s and the Hippies of the 1960s and 1970s. What commonalities do they have with each other?

. How should history view the presidency of Ronald Reagan? Was he a great, good, fair, or bad president and why?

# CONTENDING VOICES: MARGARET THATCHER VS. MIKHAIL GORBACHEV

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. What did Thatcher argue in 1995 had been the key factor that caused the end of the nuclear arms race and the eventual end of the Cold War?

2. What did Gorbachey argue in 1995 had been the “decisive factor” that caused the end of the Cold War?

# varying viewpoints

## Expanding the View

* Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (1963).

A view of modern conservatism as an extremist and paranoid fringe movement:

“Anti-elitism oriented toward groups that cannot be regarded as oppressed minorities or victims of bigotry, or anti-Communism directed against the agents or dupes of an evil foreign power, can serve as palatable outlets for those who require a scapegoat.… Intolerant movements, while often powerful, have never been able seriously to endanger the normal processes of American democracy.… But if such movements can not come to power, they can damage the democratic process for short periods of time, and they can and have injured innocent people.”

* Kevin Phillips, *Post-Conservative America* (1982).

A view of modern conservatism as more deeply rooted in American history:

“I submit that the New Right combines three powerful trend patterns that recur in American history and politics. First, to some measure it is an extension of the Wallace movement, and as such represents a current expression of the ongoing populism of the white lower middle classes, principally in the South and West.… Second, the New Right is closely allied with the sometimes potent right-to-life or antiabortion movement, the current version, perhaps, of the great one-issue moral crusades of the American past.… And this one-issue element, in turn, folds into the third phenomenon—the possible fourth occurrence of the religious revivals or ‘Great Awakenings’ that have swept across the land since the middle of the eighteenth century. If so, the religious wing of the New Right may be the political wing of a major national awakening.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. How did Daniel Bell describe the roots of modern conservatism as well as its possible effects?

2. What did Kevin Phillips argue were the three long-term roots of modern conservatism?