CHAPTER 40

America Confronts the Post–Cold War Era, 1992–2000

# focus questions

1. What were the main issues facing Bill Clinton when he entered office? How did he reconcile the traditional liberal values of the past Democrats and his vision for a different America?

2. What were the main causes of the economic prosperity of the 1990s under Clinton’s administration?

3. What changes have taken place for women?

4. What effect did the election of 2000 have on the American political scene?

5. Explore developments in art, literature, and the media.

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Elected as the first baby-boom president, Bill Clinton tried to turn the Democratic Party in a more centrist direction. Ideological conflicts and sharp partisan battles in the 1990s were partly overshadowed by a booming economy, a balanced federal budget, and America’s search to define its role in the increasingly global economy and system of international relations. A series of relatively small military interventions in Africa and the Balkans raised questions about the proper use of American force in the underdeveloped world.

**Theme:** Changes in women’s roles and the family substantially altered the ways Americans live and work.

**Theme:** American culture, literature, and art remained dynamic and influential in the world.

chapter summary

The dynamic young baby-boomer Bill Clinton defeated George H.W. Bush in 1992, and promoted an ambitious reform agenda within the context of his centrist new Democrat ideology. Clinton’s stumbles over health care reform and foreign policy opened the door to aggressive conservative Republicans, who gained control of Congress in 1994 for the first time in fifty years advocating a “contract with America.” But the Newt Gingrich–led Republicans’ overreaching enabled Clinton to revive and win a second term in 1996.

In his second term, Clinton downplayed reform and successfully claimed the political middle ground on issues such as welfare reform, affirmative action, smoking, and gun control. A booming economy created budget surpluses and encouraged Clinton’s efforts toward ending international trade barriers. Conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans led to American diplomatic and military involvements, with mixed results. A series of scandals, culminating in the Monica Lewinsky affair, led to Clinton’s impeachment and acquittal in 1999.

The decades-long movement into the workforce of women, including mothers of young children, opened ever-wider doors of opportunity, and contributed to changes in family life. Women’s concern for issues of health and child care created a persistent political gender gap between Democrats and Republicans in national elections.

Texas Governor George Walker Bush defeated Clinton’s vice president, Al Gore, in a contested cliffhanging election in 2000 that was finally decided by a Supreme Court decision.

# American culture remained incredibly dynamic and inventive, both in high culture and pop culture. The new voices of women, African Americans, Asians, and others were increasingly influential and popular, contributing to the pluralism and cultural diversity of U.S. society. Post-modernist thought emphasizing skepticism, relativity, and multiplicity has resulted in a mixing of styles in architecture, literature, music, and dance.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Examine the ideas and politics of Bill Clinton in relation to the changed ideological climate of the 1990s. Consider how Clinton attempted to steer a middle course between the more aggressively conservative Republicans and his own party’s traditional liberal base on issues such as welfare, social security, civil rights, and the environment.

REFERENCE: James MacGregor Burns and Georgia Sorenson, *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Politics of Moderation* (1999).

* Compare and contrast the foreign policy of distinct eras in American history: first, that of the beginning of the twentieth century (for example, under the presidencies of McKinley, Roosevelt, and Wilson), and second, that of the end of the twentieth century (for example, under the presidencies of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton).

REFERENCES: John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire* (2004); Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (2008).

* Analyze the impact of the feminist movement on women, men, and U.S. culture and society as a whole. Examine not only the structural changes in women’s economic and political roles, but also the transformation in values, images, and perceptions in the last two decades. Consider the real gains women have made, as well as the issues and concerns that remain.

REFERENCES: Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives* (1992); William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (1991).

* Look at the transformations of American culture and literature, especially the challenges to traditional views of proper culture and education. Consider whether the culture wars of the 1990s represented a real change from the American past, or whether the influence of new female and minority writers and artists was actually a revitalization of traditional American values of individualism, democracy, and equality.

REFERENCE: Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1993).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Compare Clinton’s impeachment and trial to that of Andrew Johnson in the 1860s. Focus on the parallel claims that the impeachment was fundamentally motivated by partisan spite and personal disdain for the president, as well as on the substantial differences in the political circumstances and in the charges themselves.
* Contrast the economic, social, and cultural life of a typical family of the 1970s with a similar family of the 1990s.
* Select one novel and one painting as exemplary of the new forces in postwar American art. Perhaps consider why a once-neglected work like Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been rediscovered and celebrated in the 1990s. (See boxed quote on page 977.)
* Compare and contrast the elections of the four people in American history to lose the election for presidency but win the popular vote: Andrew Jackson (1824), Samuel J. Tilden (1876), Grover Cleveland (1888), and Albert Gore (2000). Discuss the pluses and minuses of the electoral college. Is the electoral college outdated? Is it democratic to have an election where the will of the majority does not prevail? What would have to happen to change the way America selects a president?

# character sketches

## William “Bill” Jefferson Clinton (1946– )

Bill Clinton served many terms as Arkansas governor before being elected the nation’s forty-second president in 1992.

Clinton was born William Blythe in Arkansas. His father died in an automobile accident before Bill was born, and after his mother remarried, Bill took her new husband’s last name. Perhaps the most decisive event in Clinton’s early life was winning a scholarship to Georgetown University, a Catholic university in Washington, D.C. He so impressed some of his teachers that they suggested that he might consider becoming a priest, until he told them that he was a Southern Baptist.

After graduation from Georgetown in 1968, Clinton won a Rhodes scholarship to study politics at Britain’s Oxford University. After graduation from Yale University Law School, Clinton returned to Arkansas in 1973 to teach at the University of Arkansas Law School. In 1975, he married Hillary Rodham, a fellow Yale Law school graduate and Arkansas law professor. Clinton ran for Congress in 1974 but lost to a popular Republican. In 1976, he won election as attorney general of Arkansas.

At the time of his election as chief executive of Arkansas in 1978, Clinton was the nation’s youngest governor. He lost a race for reelection but regained the office in 1982 and every two years thereafter until his election as president.

**Quote:** “We are on the verge of a new way of doing things, grounded in our most enduring values, a philosophy that says America owes all of us an opportunity if we will assume responsibility for ourselves, our community, and our country. No more something for nothing. We’re all in this together.” (Speech, July 1993)

REFERENCE: David Maraniss, *First in His Class* (1994).

## Betty Friedan (1921–2006)

Friedan is the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and the founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), which became the principal arm of the postwar feminist movement.

Born Betty Naomi Goldstein in Peoria, Illinois, Friedan graduated from Smith College in 1942 and studied psychology at the University of California. While raising her family, she worked as a writer for women’s magazines such as *Redbook* and *Ladies’ Home Journal.* A 1957 article for *Ladies’ Home Journal* about her Smith classmates gave her the idea for *The Feminine Mystique,* which she wrote during five years of work at the New York Public Library. The book was an instant success and eventually sold millions of copies.

NOW was founded in her Washington hotel room after a 1964 federal government–sponsored conference in which women’s concerns were ignored. Friedan created the name “National Organization *for* Women” in order to include men. She later came under sharp attack from more militant feminists for not supporting their more radical ideas.

**Quote:** “Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves?… The time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women to become more complete.” (*The Feminine Mystique,* 1963)

REFERENCES: Justine Blau, *Betty Friedan* (1990); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of ‘The Feminine Mystique’* (1998).

## James Baldwin (1924–1987)

James Baldwin was the black writer whose powerful fiction and nonfiction works expressed his personal vision of the world and helped awaken white America to the depths of the racial crisis.

Baldwin was born in Harlem and spent most of his early life there. His father was an authoritarian, often cruel, Fundamentalist preacher. Many of Baldwin’s more autobiographical works, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), the work that first gained him literary fame, reveal the difficulties of his childhood and relations with his father.

Baldwin spent much time abroad, especially in Paris, where he felt he could escape the racial restrictions of the United States. However, he always returned to what he felt was his home in America. His book *The Fire Next Time* (1963) caused great controversy when it was published because of its predictions of racial violence but was later considered prophetic of the crises of the 1960s.

**Quote:** “The nation, the entire nation, has spent a hundred years avoiding the question of the place of the black man in it.… Any honest examination of the national life proves how far we are from the standard of human freedom with which we began. The recovery of this standard demands of everyone who loves this country a hard look at himself.” (*Nobody Knows My Name,* 1961)

REFERENCE: David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (1994).

## Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Pollock was the most influential American artist of the immediate postwar era and is considered one of the great modern masters of painting.

The son of an unsuccessful Wyoming rancher, Pollock developed a deep love of nature while working summer jobs at the Grand Canyon.

In school, Pollock was interested only in art and frequently got into academic and disciplinary difficulty. He studied with Thomas Hart Benton, the great American regionalist painter. Pollock’s early nature paintings show Benton’s influence but also reflect a tendency toward the abstraction that he later developed.

From 1935 to 1943, Pollock worked for the federal WPA Art Project. In the early 1940s, he was influenced by Jungian therapy and the work of Picasso and André Breton. He made his breakthrough to abstract expressionism and later developed his techniques of dripping and splattering paint on the canvas to create complex special effects. Some of his works that originally sold for $600 were later bought for over $2 million.

Pollock seldom appeared in public and cultivated an image as a somewhat rough and mysterious character. He died in an auto accident in 1956.

**Quote:** “When I am *in* my painting I’m not aware of what I’m doing.… I have no fears of making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.”

REFERENCE: Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock* (1990).

# questions for class discussion

1. What is likely to be the enduring legacy of Bill Clinton in American politics? Did the focus on his personality and the scandals leading to impeachment drastically alter the way he is likely to be viewed by future historians, or will his economic policies and his political success in steering the Democratic Party toward the political center be viewed as substantive achievements outweighing the weaknesses? (See boxed quotes on pages 959 and 967.)

2. Compare and contrast American foreign policy at the beginning of the twentieth century to that of the beginning of the twenty-first century. What differences are there? Are there any similarities? 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?

3. Why has culture become the focus of a series of wars between different intellectuals and social groups in the past ten years? Why are many of these wars over issues fought in American colleges and universities? (See boxed quote on page 965.)

# makers of america: the latinos

## Questions for Class Discussion

. What distinctive conditions have shaped the experience of Latin American immigrants, especially Mexican-Americans, in the United States?

. How has the proximity of Mexico to the United States affected the relations of Mexican-Americans with both their old and their new countries?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Examine those areas of the United States that have been most affected by Hispanic or Mexican immigration. Consider the likely impact of a large Hispanic presence on the politics, economics, religion, and culture of those areas.
* Examine the changing image of Hispanic-Americans in films, television, music, and other forms of popular culture. Perhaps use some samples of earlier stereotypes from the 1940s or 1950s to demonstrate the changes.

# CONTENDING VOICES: JOE LIEBERMAN VS. MARION WRIGHT EDELMAN

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. How did Senator Lieberman’s support for the 1996 welfare reform act reflect the views of “New” Democrats?

2. How did the founder of the Children’s Defense Fund view the 1996 welfare reform act?