CHAPTER 38

Challenges to the Postwar Order, 1973–1980

# focus questions

. What were the causes of economic stagnation during the 1970s?

. How did Nixon’s policy of détente develop under the administrations of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter? Did détente help or hurt relations with China and the Soviet Union?

. How did the Vietnam conflict end?

. What was Watergate and how did the episode tarnish the office of the presidency?

. What were the major challenges faced by the Carter administration, both foreign and domestic?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** As the war in Vietnam finally came to a disastrous conclusion, the United States struggled to create a more stable international climate. Détente with the two communist powers temporarily reduced Cold War tensions, but trouble in the Middle East threatened America’s energy supplies and economic stability.

**Theme:** Weakened by political difficulties of their own and others’ making, the administrations of the 1970s had trouble coping with America’s growing economic problems. The public also had trouble facing up to a sharp sense of limits and a general disillusionment with society. With the notable exception of the successful feminist movement, the social reform efforts of the 1960s fractured and stalled, as the country settled into a frustrating and politically divisive stalemate.

chapter summary

Nonelected Gerald Ford took over after Watergate forced Nixon to resign. The Communist Vietnamese finally overran the South Vietnamese government in 1975. The defeat in Vietnam added to a general sense of disillusionment with society and a new sense of limits on American power. The civil rights movement fractured, and divisive issues of busing and affirmative action enhanced racial tensions. The most successful social movement was feminism, which achieved widespread social breakthroughs though failing to pass the Equal Rights Amendment.

Campaigning against Washington and Watergate, outsider Jimmy Carter proved unable to master Congress or the economy once he took office. The Camp David agreement brought peace between Egypt and Israel, but the Iranian revolution led to new energy troubles. The invasion of Afghanistan and the holding of American hostages in Iran added to Carter’s woes.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Examine Nixon’s domestic policies, including his corruption and resignation after Watergate. Explain the connection between the immediate Watergate scandal and the wider attacks on the imperial presidency as reflected in, for example, the War Powers Act.

REFERENCES: Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon* (1989); Stanley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (1990).

* Analyze the ebb and flow of American foreign policy in the seventies, from Nixon’s Moscow-Beijing (Peking) visits to Afghanistan. Particular attention might be paid to the difficulties in implementing Kissinger’s plans for a stabilizing agreement among the three great powers in a still-volatile world, and to Jimmy Carter’s attempt to bring a stronger moral dimension to American foreign relations.

REFERENCES: Robert D. Schulzinger, *Henry Kissinger: Doctor of Diplomacy* (1989); Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power* (1986).

* Explain the closely interrelated problems of the Middle East, energy, and economics in the seventies, perhaps focusing on the way America’s growing economic difficulties made it more vulnerable to Middle East events, which in turn added to economic trouble. Consider the U.S. crisis with Iran in relation to the general political tensions of the region.

REFERENCES: Michael B. Stoff, *Oil, War and American Security* (1980); James Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (1987).

* Examine the reasons for the successes of American feminism at a time when most social movements spawned in the 1960s had fragmented and lost broader public appeal. Consider the relationship between more liberal or radical feminist activists who actively promoted social and culture changes and the large numbers of American women who entered the workforce and altered family roles even if they were not politically engaged. (See boxed quote on page 921.)

REFERENCE: Susan M. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (1998).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on Nixon and Watergate. Consider whether Watergate was in the end a victory for democracy or whether it created national cynicism about leaders and weakened Americans’ faith in democracy and the presidency. (See boxed quote on page 911 and section Examining the Evidence on page 913.)
* Examine the rise of the environmental movement. Consider the relations of environmental concerns to economic issues in the 1970s, including oil and other energy sources.
* Consider the origins of the conflicts over busing and affirmative action. Explain how the broad American consensus in favor of civil rights, voting rights, integration, and economic opportunity fell apart on the questions of positive government action to advance African Americans’ economic and political standing.
* Discuss the Iranian revolution in relation to the rise of militant Islam in the Middle East. Consider why Americans (including government officials) had such difficulty comprehending Islamic fundamentalism.
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as America Needs an Equal Rights Amendment and A Defense of the Nixon Presidency. 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 videos: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume V: 1971–1975: Approaching the Apocalypse*: “The public’s faith in their government shatters with the disclosure of Watergate. Nixon becomes the first President in U.S. history to resign, as corruption and politics truly become synonymous. Can America’s trust in its leaders ever be restored?” and *Volume V: 1976–1980: Starting Over*: “The upheavals of the ’60s and ’70s now leave many confronting the emotional fallout, including forced interracial busing and women torn between their roles as housewives and breadwinners. Meanwhile, the sounds and style of Disco dominate the decade.”
* Have the students read selections from John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974). Both books are considered classics of American political thought—both arrive at very different conclusions.
* Have the students read Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972). Use the novel to explore issues about the dangers of forced conformity. The book was made into a movie in 1975 and again in 2004.
* Have the students read Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech to the American people; *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present* (1996).

# character sketches

## Richard Nixon (1913–1994)

Nixon was the most controversial politician of his generation and has remained a source of intrigue and puzzlement for scholars and the public.

The second of five sons of a devout Quaker family, Nixon was third in his class of twenty-five at Duke Law School. He wanted to be an FBI agent but instead became a local California attorney and later joined the Office of Price Administration and the navy.

He defeated Jerry Voorhis, a prominent New Deal Democratic congressman, in 1946 and won national fame for his work on the Hiss case. His 1950 campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas was dominated by his red-baiting charges against her.

Thomas Dewey promoted Nixon for the vice presidency in 1952. His 1962 defeat for the California governorship was generally considered to have marked the end of his political career, so his recovery to win the 1968 GOP nomination was nearly miraculous.

**Quote:** “You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore, because gentlemen, this is my last press conference.” (Press conference after election loss, 1962)

REFERENCES: Joan Hoff Wilson, *Nixon Reconsidered* (1994); Rachel Barron, *Richard Nixon* (1999).

## Henry Kissinger (1923– )

At the height of his power in the 1970s, Kissinger exercised more influence over American foreign policy than any secretary of state since George Marshall, and perhaps since William Seward.

Born in southern Germany, the son of a high school teacher, Heinz Kissinger (his original name) was frequently beaten up by anti-Semitic gangs. His father lost his job, and the family was forced to flee to the United States in 1938. Many writers have seen a connection between the instability of Kissinger’s youth and his strong pursuit of order and stability in international relations.

His family never fully assimilated to America, and Kissinger retained his thick German accent throughout his life. In the U.S. Army, he became a translator and eventually administered a small district in occupied Germany.

His book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), which advocated the use of limited nuclear weapons, brought him to the attention of Nelson Rockefeller and began his career as an influential foreign-policy and defense theorist.

**Quote:** “The deepest international conflict in the world today is not between us and the Soviet Union, but between the Soviet Union and Communist China.… Therefore, one of the positive prospects in the current situation is that, whatever the basic intentions of Soviet leaders, confronted with the prospect of a China growing in strength…they may want a period of détente in the West.”

REFERENCE: Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (1993).

## Sam Ervin (1896–1985)

Ervin was the North Carolina senator who gained fame for heading the Senate Watergate investigations.

After growing up in rural North Carolina, Ervin was wounded and decorated for valor in World War I and earned a Harvard law degree in 1922. He helped defeat a North Carolina law banning the teaching of evolution. He was also a longtime judge and U.S. congressman.

Ervin was considered the Senate’s most noted authority on the U.S. Constitution and was a strong advocate of civil liberties and legal rights for the indigent.

His bobbing eyebrows, thick jowls, and down-home sense of humor made him a popular hero during the Watergate hearings. He had a vast fund of quotations from the Bible, Shakespeare, English history, and American constitutional history at his command and often used them to enliven the proceedings. Although he always called himself a “simple country lawyer,” he was in fact a highly learned and skilled jurist.

**Quote:** “As long as I have a mind to think, a tongue to speak, and a heart to love my country, I shall deny that the Constitution confers any autocratic power on the President, or authorizes him to convert George Washington’s America into Caesar’s Rome.… When all is said, the only sure antidote for future Watergates is understanding of fundamental principles and intellectual and moral integrity in the men and women who achieve or are entrusted with governmental or political power.” (*Report of Senate Watergate Committee,* 1974)

REFERENCE: Dick Dabney, *A Good Man: The Life of Sam Ervin* (1976).

# questions for class discussion

. Could any of Nixon’s achievements in office compensate for his Watergate crimes? What should history say about the Nixon presidency?

. What were the short- and long-term consequences of the communists’ victory in Vietnam? How do these affect an assessment of the war? What could America have done differently to win the war in Vietnam?

. How was the civil rights movement affected by federal policies in the 1970s, especially affirmative action?

. What were the consequences of America’s new economic vulnerability? How did it affect politics at home and abroad during the 1970s? (See boxed quotes on pages 925 and 927 and section Thinking Globally on pages 916-917.)

# makers of america: the vietnamese

## Questions for Class Discussion

. How do the Vietnamese immigrants fit into the long tradition of immigration to America? How did the particular conditions of their initial migration—the loss of an unpopular war—affect their entry into American society?

. In what ways do the Vietnamese-Americans appear to be preserving their traditions? In what ways might they likely adapt their traditions to American conditions, as previous immigrant groups have done?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Compare the experience of the Vietnamese with other immigrants from Asia, for example, the Chinese (see Chapter 24), the Filipinos (see Chapter 30), and the Japanese (see Chapter 38). Consider whether the term *Asian-American* is too broad to describe all these groups.
* Given the history of earlier immigrant groups, consider what issues will likely face the Vietnamese-American communities in the near future. Examine whether there is a natural generational transition that can be expected to affect the children and grandchildren of those who have immigrated.

# MAKERS OF AMERICA: THE FEMINISTS

## Questions for Class Discussion

. In what ways is the feminist movement similar to other movements for equality and social justice in American history (for example, the abolitionist movement, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement), and in what ways is it different? How is feminism affected by the fact that most women have intense personal relationships with men?

. What are the roots of the disagreements between equal rights feminism and those feminists who advocate attention to gender difference? What are the implications of each position for government policy (for example, regarding workplace protections, regulation of pornography, or separate-sex education)?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Select one nineteenth-century or early-twentieth-century women’s leader (for example, Lucretia Mott, Frances Willard, Jane Addams, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman), and compare and contrast their ideas about women’s issues and roles in society with that of a prominent second wave feminist leader (for example, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, or Catherine MacKinnon). Consider which differences are due to the different times in which they lived, and which reflect underlying philosophical disagreements about gender and society.
* Trace the changing numbers and roles of women in the U.S. Congress from the 1950s to the present. Examine a few female representatives’ and senators’ careers and voting records to uncover their relationship to the visible feminist movement. (Perhaps compare two female officials from different party affiliations or different regions of the country.)

**CONTENDING VOICES: LEWIS POWELL VS. DOUGLAS FRASER**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What did corporate lawyer Powell propose that American businesses do in 1971? Why did Powell argue that such actions were necessary?

2. By 1978, how did labor leader Fraser view the results of the business community’s implementation of Powell’s 1971 proposal?