CHAPTER 41

The American People Face a New Century, 2001-2014

# focus questions

. What were the successes and failures of George W. Bush’s administration? How did these affect the outcome of the election of 2008?

. How did the attack of 9/11 affect the country?

. What changes have taken place for groups such as Hispanics and other minorities to alter the American scene?

4. How has immigration influenced policies and practices of America?

5. What were the successes and failures of Barack Obama’s administration?

6. What are the major issues that Americans will have to face as they move further into the twenty-first century?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The 2000 election, between Bush and Gore, and the subsequent events that followed it would deeply divide the nation and alienate the United States from traditional allies in the world community.

**Theme:** The reelection of George W. Bush to a second term in 2004 brought about additional issues and concerns across the country; most notably, the war in Iraq continued to plague America and its reputation around the world. Bush saw his reelection as a mandate to continue his conservative agenda and focused his second term on addressing issues such as attacking many of the New Deal programs, adding conservative elements to the Supreme Court, and standing up for his position on the War on Terror.

**Theme:** The United States underwent drastic economic and social change in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The economic transformation from an industrial age to an information age produced new economic advances, as well as a rapidly increasing income gap between the wealthy and the poor. The arrival of new immigrant groups substantially altered the ways Americans live and work.

chapter summary

As the fourth president elected in American history to lose the popular vote, George W. Bush entered the oval office promising to bring to Washington the conciliatory skills he had fine-tuned as Republican governor of Texas, where he had worked well with the Democratic majority in the state’s legislature. But as president, Bush proved to be more of a divider than a unifier, focusing on social issues such as abortion, a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages, embryonic stem cell research, the environment, and add to that an increasing budget deficit—these polarizing policies both reflected and deepened the cultural chasm that divided American society.

On September 11, 2001, suicidal terrorists slammed two hijacked airliners into the twin towers of New York City’s World Trade Center, a third plane crashed into the Pentagon, and a fourth plane was forced down by its heroic passengers in rural Pennsylvania. Osama bin Laden had been identified as the mastermind behind the World Trade Center attack, and when the Taliban refused to turn over bin Laden to American officials, Bush ordered a massive military campaign against Afghanistan. Within three months, American and Afghani rebel forces had overthrown the Taliban but failed to find bin Laden.

The fear of future threats lead American officials to take aggressive and controversial actions following the events of September 11: congressional passage of the USA-Patriot Act, creation of the Department of Homeland Security, rounding up and trying suspected terrorists in military tribunals (where the usual rules and procedures do not apply), and the controversial invasion and occupation of Iraq.

With the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004, the war in Iraq continued to be a critical issue with the American public. But more important, Bush saw his reelection as a Conservative mandate, to which he continued many of the same policies he began in 2001. However, Bush overplayed his hand with this, and in the midterm elections of 2006, Democrats regained control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1994.

Barack Obama’s election in 2008 and reelection in 2012 reflected key demographic developments within the United States. Early in his first term, President Obama was able to respond to the economic crisis as well as secure passage of landmark legislation on health care and financial reform. President Obama, however, was not able to deliver on his promise of a “postpartisan” politics as political divisions deepened during his presidency. After GOP gains in the 2010 elections, Republicans blocked many of President Obama’s initiatives. As of 2014, partisan gridlock remains the norm in the nation’s capital.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the American economy underwent dynamic changes from an age of heavy industry to an age of computerized information and mass culture. The Internet helped fuel a new economy linked with the rest of the world. The benefits of the new wealth did not reach everyone, however, as the gaps between those with education and those without contributed to an increasingly severe inequality in Americans’ wealth and income.

As the population began to age, the elderly became both a potent lobbying force and an economic threat to the viability of social welfare programs like Social Security and Medicare.

A vast new wave of immigration, especially from Asia and Latin America, brought newcomers seeking economic opportunity and liberties unavailable in their homelands. Political efforts to deal with the rising tide of immigration have been divisive and unsuccessful.

The problems of poverty remained stubborn and frustrating to millions of Americans, including many minorities.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* 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); second, that of the end of the twentieth century (for example, under the presidencies of George H. Bush and Bill Clinton); and third, that of the beginning of the twenty-first century (for example, under the presidency of George W. Bush).

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

* Explain the broad changes in American economic and social development since 1975. The emphasis might be on the severe difficulties caused by the new vulnerability of the United States in the world economy, as well as innovations in technology and business management. Consider the way economic change has altered American society, including family transformations and population migrations.

REFERENCE: Paul Boyer, *Promises to Keep: The United States Since World War II* (1995).

* Examine the new immigration to America in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, including its impact on the American economy and society. Perhaps compare this period of immigration to earlier waves of immigration—including some of the reactions of native-born Americans.

REFERENCE: David Reimers, *Still the Golden Door: The Third World Comes to America* (1986).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Select one of the less-well-known new immigrant groups, for example, Asian Indians or West Indians. Look at their reasons for immigration, their patterns of occupation and settlement, and the opportunities and obstacles they have experienced.
* Examine the new patterns as represented in the 2010 census. Consider particularly the growth in political strength of groups such as Hispanics and the elderly.

# character sketches

## George Walker Bush (1946– )

The presidency of the United States is only the second public office to which George W. Bush was elected, after the governorship of Texas.

George W. Bush was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and moved with his family to Texas at the age of two. He is the oldest of five living children (four boys and one girl) of George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush (another girl died of leukemia in 1953 at age three). While his father was a rising star in Republican politics, George W. attended Philips Andover Academy in Massachusetts and Yale University, graduating in 1968. After several years of dissolution, drifting, unemployment, and occasional political work in Texas, Alabama, and Florida, he entered Harvard University, earning a Master of Business Administration degree in 1975.

He then moved to the west Texas town of Midland and married a school librarian, Laura Welch. His younger brother Jeb was considered the future politician of the family, while George W.’s talents were widely disregarded. This judgment seemed confirmed when he ran for Congress from Midland in 1978, but lost to a Democrat.

The several oil business ventures he attempted, the Arbusto and Spectrum Companies, were not very successful either, but earned enough, along with family support, for him to become the lead investor in buying the Texas Rangers baseball team for $600,000 in 1988 (he sold his share a decade later for $15 million).

In 1986, he underwent a born again religious conversion, and moved from his family’s traditional Episcopal faith into the Methodist Church. In 1994, Bush was nominated by the Republicans to run against the popular Democratic Texas governor Ann Richards, and his victory was considered a great upset. His reelection victory with 65 percent of the vote propelled him into the leading position for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000.

**Quote:** “Our country has been through a long and trying period, with the outcome of the presidential election not finalized for longer than any of us could imagine… I believe things happen for a reason, and I hope the wait of the last five weeks will heighten a desire to move beyond the bitterness and partisanship of the recent past.” (Victory speech, December 13, 2000).

REFERENCE: http://www.georgewbushlibrary.smu.edu/; George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (2010).

## Barack H. Obama (1961– )

Elected president in November 2008, Barack H. Obama became the first African American president of the United States when he took the oath of office on January 20, 2009.

Born on August 4, 1961 in Honolulu, Hawaii, Barack Hussein Obama II was the child of a black Kenyan father (Barack Hussein Obama, 1936-1982) and a white American woman from Kansas (Ann Dunham, 1942-1995). After meeting at the University of Hawaii's Manoa campus, Barack’s parents married in early 1961, but filed for divorce in January 1964. When Barack’s mother remarried a man from Indonesia, Barack spent some of his childhood years in Indonesia before returning to Hawaii at age ten to live with his maternal grandparents until he graduated from high school.

Barack Obama graduated from Columbia University with a major in political science in 1983. After working as a community organizer in Harlem as well as in Chicago, Obama earned a law degree from Harvard, where he was the first African American elected president of the *Harvard Law Review* journal. After earning his law degree in 1991, Obama returned to Chicago to work in a law firm that specialized in civil-rights law. He eventually also began teaching at the University of Chicago Law School. He served three terms representing the 13th District in the Illinois State Senate from 1997 to 2004. In 2004, Obama was elected to a U.S. Senate seat representing Illinois, and he became the Senate's only African American lawmaker when he took office in January 2005.

Barack Obama married Michelle LaVaughn Robinson (born January 17, 1964) on October 3, 1992. The Obamas have two daughters, Malia Ann Obama (born July 4, 1998) and Natasha (Sasha) Obama (born June 10, 2001).

Quote: “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.” Victory speech in US presidential election, home state of Chicago, November 4, 2008.

REFERENCES: http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/barackobama; Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995); http://www.notablebiographies.com/news/Li-Ou/Obama-Barack.html.

# questions for class discussion

. Was the growing inequality in American wealth and incomes the result of natural economic market forces, or was it encouraged by deliberate political policies, especially the tax cuts and trade policies of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s?

. Has the American family been in decline, or has it simply changed forms while developing different kinds of strengths? What causes the fears of a generational war between the expanding numbers of elderly and younger Americans?

. Has the nature of American race relations been substantially altered since the 1960s civil rights movement, or are relations between whites and African Americans fundamentally the same? Has African American society itself undergone substantial changes? (See boxed quote on page 993.)

. What similarities are there to the spread of Communism during the post–World War II era to the spread of Democracy in the post–Cold War era? If America was justified in intervening in halting the spread of communism in Asia, would Iraqi insurgents be justified in intervening in halting the spread of democracy in Iraq? Why or why not?

5. How successful was America in punishing the attackers of 9/11? Was America’s “war on terror” a success or failure? Why or why not?

6. What is likely to be the enduring legacy of George W. Bush in American politics? How will American history view his presidency: great, good, fair, or poor? Justify and support your answers. (See Examining the Evidence section on page 983 as well as section Thinking Globally on pages 990-991. See also boxed quotes on pages 984 and 985.)

7. What lies in America’s future? What kinds of cultural, economic, and foreign dilemmas will future American politicians face? (See boxed quote on page 1005.) What will be the defining moment in the twenty-first century?

# CONTENDING VOICES: TEA PARTY ACTIVIST VS. OCCUPY WALL STREET ACTIVIST

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. What did the Tea Party activist argue was the main reason why she and others were engaging in dissent?

2. What did the Occupy Wall Street activist argue was the main reason why he and others were engaging in dissent?