

# The American People Face a New Century



*As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 1862

**M**ore than two hundred years old as the twenty-first century began, the United States was both an old and a new nation. It boasted one of the longest uninterrupted traditions of democratic government of any country on earth. Indeed, it had pioneered the techniques of mass democracy and was, in that sense, the oldest modern polity. As one of the earliest countries to industrialize, America had also dwelt in the modern economic era longer than most nations.

But the Republic was in many ways still youthful as well. Innovation, entrepreneurship, and risk-taking—all characteristics of youth—were honored national values. The twenty-first century began much like the twentieth, with American society continuing to be rejuvenated by fresh waves of immigrants, full of energy and ambition. The U.S. economy, despite problems, was generating new jobs at a rate of some 2 million per year. American inventions—especially computer and communications technologies—were

transforming the face of global society. The whole world seemed to worship the icons of American culture—downing soft drinks and donning blue jeans, watching Hollywood films, listening to rock or country and western music, even adopting indigenous American sports like baseball and basketball. In the realm of consumerism, American products appeared to have Coca-Colonized the globe.

The history of American society also seemed to have increased global significance as the third millennium of the Christian era opened. Americans were a pluralistic people who had struggled for centuries to provide opportunity and to achieve tolerance and justice for many different religious, ethnic, and racial groups. Their historical experience could offer valuable lessons to the rapidly internationalizing planetary society that was emerging at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

In politics, economics, and culture, the great social experiment of American democracy was far

from completed as the United States faced its future. Much history remained to be made as the country entered its third century of nationhood. But men and women make history only within the framework bequeathed to them by earlier generations. For better or worse, they march forward along time's path bearing the burdens of the past. Knowing when they have come to a truly new turn in the road, when they can lay part of their burden down and when they cannot, or should not—all this constitutes the sort of wisdom that only historical study can engender.

### **Economic Revolutions**

When the twentieth century opened, United States Steel Corporation was the flagship business of America's booming industrial revolution. U.S. Steel was a typical "heavy industry," cranking out the ingots and girders and sheet metal that built the nation's basic physical infrastructure. A generation later, General Motors, annually producing millions of automobiles, became the characteristic American corporation, signaling the historic shift to a mass consumer economy that began in the 1920s and flowered fully in the 1950s. Following World War II, the rise of International Business Machines (IBM) symbolized yet another momentous transformation, to the fast-paced "information age," when the storing, organizing, and processing of data became an industry in its own right.

The pace of the information age soon accelerated. By century's end, the rapid emergence of Microsoft Corporation and the phenomenal growth of the Internet heralded an explosive communications revolution. Americans now rocketed down the "information superhighway" toward the uncharted terrain of an electronic global village, where traditional geographic, social, and political boundaries could be vaulted with the tap of a keypad.

The communications revolution was full of both promise and peril. In the blink of an eye, ordinary citizens could gain access to information once available only to privileged elites with vast libraries or expert staffs at their disposal. Businesspeople instantaneously girdled the planet with transactions of prodigious scope and serpentine complexity. Japanese bankers might sell wheat contracts in Chicago and simultaneously direct the profits to buying oil

shipments from the Persian Gulf offered by a broker in Amsterdam. By the late 1990s, a "dot-com" explosion of new commercial ventures quickly expanded the market (and the stock-market stakes) for entrepreneurs leading the way in making the Internet a twenty-first-century electronic mall, library, and entertainment center rolled into one.

But the very speed and efficiency of the new communications tools threatened to wipe out entire occupational categories. Postal delivery people, travel agents, store clerks, bank tellers, stock brokers, and all kinds of other workers whose business it was to mediate between product and client, might find themselves rendered obsolete in the era of the Internet. And as the computer makes possible "classrooms without walls," where students can pursue learning largely on their own, even teachers, whose job is essentially to mediate between students and various bodies of knowledge, might well end up as roadkill on the information superhighway.

Increasingly, scientific research was the engine that drove the economy, and new scientific knowl-

edge posed new social and moral dilemmas. When scientists first unlocked the secrets of molecular genetic structure in the 1950s, the road lay open to breeding new strains of high-yield, pest- and weather-resistant crops; to curing hereditary diseases; and also, unfortunately, to unleashing genetic mutations that might threaten the fragile ecological balance of the wondrous biosphere in which humankind was delicately suspended. As technical mastery of biological and medical techniques advanced, unprecedented ethical questions clamored for resolution. Should the human gene pool itself be “engineered”? What principles should govern the allocation of human organs for lifesaving transplants, or of scarce dialysis machines, or of artificial hearts? Was it wise in the first place to spend money on such costly devices rather than devote society’s resources to improved sanitation, maternal and infant care, and nutritional and health education? Who was the rightful parent of a child born to a “surrogate mother” or conceived by artificial insemination? How, if at all, should society regulate the increasingly lengthy and often painful process of dying? What rules should guide efforts to clone human beings—or should such efforts even be attempted?

## Affluence and Inequality

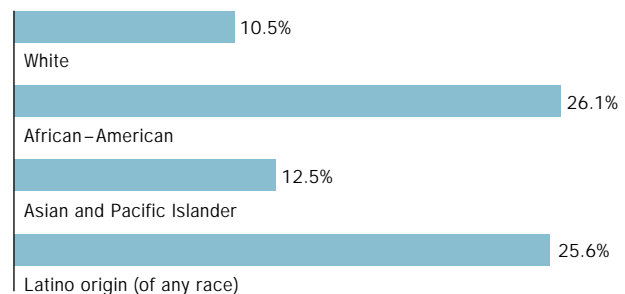
Americans were still an affluent people at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Median household income declined somewhat in the early 1990s but rebounded by 1998 to about \$39,000. Yet even those Americans with incomes below the government’s official poverty level (defined in 1998 as \$16,600 for a family of four) enjoyed a standard of living higher than that of two-thirds of the rest of humankind.

Americans were no longer the world’s wealthiest people in the 1990s, as they had been in the quarter-century after World War II. Citizens of several other countries enjoyed higher average per-capita incomes, and many nations boasted more equitable distributions of wealth. In an unsettling reversal of long-term trends in American society, during the last two decades of the twentieth century, the rich got much richer, while the poor got an ever-shrinking share of the pie. The richest 20 percent of Americans in the 1990s raked in nearly

half the nation’s income, whereas the poorest 20 percent received less than 4 percent. The gap between rich and poor began to widen in the 1980s and widened further in the following decade. That trend was evident in many industrial societies, but it was most pronounced in the United States. Between 1968 and 1998, the share of the nation’s income that flowed to the top 20 percent of its households swelled from 40 percent to more than 49 percent. Even more striking, in the same period the top 5 percent of income earners saw their share of the national income grow from about 15 percent to more than 20 percent. The Welfare Reform Bill of 1996, restricting access to social services and requiring able-bodied welfare recipients to find work, weakened the financial footing of many impoverished families still further.

Widening inequality could be measured in other ways as well: chief executives in the 1970s typically earned forty-one times the income of the average worker in their corporations; by the 1990s they earned 225 times as much. At the same time, some 34 million people, 12.7 percent of all Americans (8.2 percent of whites, 26.1 percent of African-Americans, and 25.6 percent of Latinos), remained mired in poverty—a depressing indictment of the inequities afflicting an affluent and allegedly egalitarian republic.

What caused the widening income gap? Some critics pointed to the tax and fiscal policies of the Reagan and Bush years, which favored the wealthy and penalized the poor. But deeper-running historical currents probably played a more powerful



Poverty Rates of Americans by Race and Latino Origin, 1998 (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, March Current Population Survey.)

**Who Pays Federal Income Taxes?  
(share of U.S. income tax, by income percentile)**

<b>Income Group (base income shown as of 1998)</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1998</b>
Top 1% (above \$269,496)	28.7%	34.8%
Top 5% (above \$114,729)	47.4%	53.8%
Top 10% (above \$83,220)	59.1%	65.0%
Top 25% (above \$50,607)	79.5%	82.7%
Top 50% (above \$25,491)	95.2%	95.8%
Bottom 50% (below \$25,491)	4.8%	4.2%

Because the United States has long had a “progressive” income tax system, in which tax obligations are distributed according to ability to pay, widening income inequality was reflected in a redistribution of tax burdens. In the booming 1990s, the rich did indeed get richer—but they also paid an increasing fraction of the total federal tax take.

(Source: Internal Revenue Service data, Tax Foundation.)

role, as suggested by the similar experiences of other industrialized societies. Among the most conspicuous causes were intensifying global economic competition; the shrinkage in high-paying manufacturing jobs for semi-skilled and unskilled workers; the greater economic rewards commanded by educated workers in high-tech industries; the decline of unions; the growth of part-time and temporary work; the rising tide of relatively low-skill immigrants; and the increasing tendency of educated men and women to marry one another and both work, creating households with very high incomes.

**Widening Income Inequality**

Share of Aggregate Income	1980	1990	1999
Lowest fifth	4.3	3.9	3.6
Second fifth	10.3	9.6	8.9
Middle fifth	16.9	15.9	14.9
Fourth fifth	24.9	24.0	23.2
Highest fifth	43.7	46.6	49.4
Top 5%	15.8	18.6	21.5

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the top fifth of the country's households made significant gains in income, while everyone else lost ground. (Source: U.S. Census.)

**The Feminist Revolution**

All Americans were caught up in the great economic changes of the late twentieth century, but no group was more profoundly affected than women. When the century opened, women made up about 20 percent of all workers. Over the next five decades, they increased their presence in the labor force at a fairly steady rate, except for a temporary spurt during World War II. Then, beginning in the 1950s, women's entry into the workplace accelerated dramatically. By the 1990s nearly half of all workers were women,

**Percentage of Working Married Women with Children (husband present), 1950–1998**

Year	Total Percentage	No Children Under 18	Children 6–17 Only	Children Under 6
1950	23.8	30.3	28.3	11.9
1960	30.5	34.7	39.0	18.6
1970	40.8	42.2	49.2	30.3
1980	50.1	46.0	61.7	45.1
1994	60.6	53.2	76.0	61.7
1998	61.8	70.6	76.8	63.7

(Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, relevant years.)

and the majority of working-age women held jobs outside the home. Most astonishing was the upsurge in employment among mothers. In 1950, 90 percent of mothers with children under the age of six did not work for pay. But by the 1990s, a majority of women with children as young as one year old were wage earners. Women now brought home the bacon and then cooked it, too.

Beginning in the 1960s, many all-male strongholds, including Yale, Princeton, West Point, Annapolis, the Air Force Academy, and even, grudgingly and belatedly, southern military academies like the Citadel and Virginia Military Institute, opened their doors to women. Women are now piloting commercial airliners and orbiting in outer space. They govern states and cities, write Supreme Court decisions, and debate the law of the land in both houses of Congress. In 1996 women cracked another gender barrier when they launched a professional basketball league of their own.

Yet despite these gains, many feminists remained frustrated. Women continued to receive lower wages—an average 76.5 cents on the dollar in 1999 compared with men doing the same full-time work—and they tended to concentrate in a few low-prestige, low-paying occupations (the “pink-collar ghetto”). Although they made up more than half the population, women in the 1990s accounted for only 25 percent of lawyers and judges (up from 5 percent in 1970) and 22 percent of physicians (up from 10 percent in 1970). Overt sexual discrimination explained some of this occupational segregation, but most of it seemed attributable to the greater burdens of parenthood on women than on men. Women were far more likely than men to interrupt their careers to bear and raise children, and even to

choose less demanding career paths to allow for fulfilling those traditional roles. Discrimination and a focus on children also helped account for the persistence of a “gender gap” in national elections. Women continued to vote in greater numbers than men for Democratic candidates, who were often perceived as being more willing to favor government support for health and child care, education, and job equality.

As the revolution in women’s status rolled on in the 1990s, men’s lives changed as well. A men’s movement sprang up that sought to redefine male roles in a new age of increasing gender equality. Some employers provided paternity leave as well as maternity leave, in recognition of the shared obligations of the two-worker household. As traditional female responsibilities such as cooking, laundry, and child care spilled over to men, many corporations sponsored highly popular fatherhood seminars and husbands’ support groups. Recognizing

the new realities of the modern American household, Congress passed a Family Leave Bill in 1993, mandating job protection for working fathers as well as mothers who needed to take time off work for family-related reasons.

### **The Fading Family**

The nuclear family, once prized as the foundation of society and the nursery of the Republic, suffered heavy blows in modern America. By the 1990s one out of every two marriages ended in divorce. Seven times more children were affected by divorce than at the beginning of the century. Kids who commuted between separated parents were commonplace. The 1950s ideal of a family with two parents, only one of whom worked, was now a virtually useless way to picture the typical American household.

Traditional families were not only falling apart at an alarming rate but were also increasingly slow to form in the first place. The proportion of adults living alone tripled in the four decades after 1950, and by the 1990s nearly one-third of women aged

twenty-five to twenty-nine had never married. In the 1960s, 5 percent of all births were to unmarried women, but three decades later one out of four white babies, one out of three Hispanic babies, and two out of three African-American babies were born to single mothers. Every fourth child in America was growing up in a household that lacked two parents. The collapse of the traditional family contributed heavily to the pauperization of many women and children, as single parents (usually mothers) strug-

*In his inaugural address in January 1989, President George Bush (b. 1924) declared,*

“My friends, we are not the sum of our possessions; they are not the measure of our lives. In our hearts we know what matters: . . . to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home, his neighborhood, and his town better than he found it.”

gled to keep their households economically afloat and their families emotionally intact.

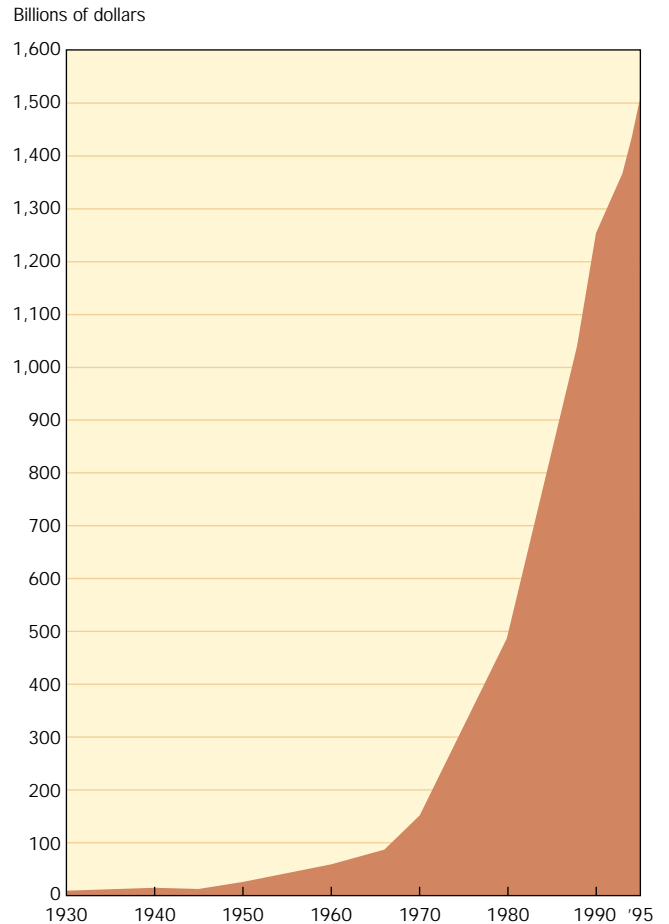
Child-rearing, the family's foremost function, was being increasingly assigned to "parent-substitutes" at day-care centers or schools—or to television, the modern age's "electronic baby-sitter." Estimates were that the average child by age sixteen had watched up to fifteen thousand hours of TV—more time than was spent in the classroom. Parental anxieties multiplied with the advent of the Internet—an electronic cornucopia where youngsters could "surf" through poetry and problem sets as well as pornography.

Born and raised without the family support enjoyed by their forebears, Americans were also increasingly likely to be lonely in their later years. Most elderly people in the 1990s depended on pension plans and government Social Security payments, not on their loved ones, for their daily bread. The great majority of them drew their last breath not in their own homes, but in hospitals and nursing facilities. From youth to old age, the role of the family was dwindling.

### The Aging of America

Old age was more and more likely to be a lengthy experience for Americans, who were living longer than ever before. A person born at the dawn of the century could expect to survive less than fifty years, but a white male born in the 1990s could anticipate a life span of more than seventy-six years. His white female counterpart would probably outlive him by seven years. (The figures were slightly lower for nonwhites, reflecting differences in living standards, especially diet and health care.) The census of 1950 recorded that women for the first time made up a majority of Americans, thanks largely to greater female longevity. Miraculous medical advances lengthened and strengthened lives. Noteworthy were the development of antibiotics after 1940 and Dr. Jonas Salk's discovery in 1953 of a vaccine against a dreadedcrippler, polio.

Longer lives spelled more older people. One American in eight was over sixty-five years of age in the 1990s, and projections were that one of every five people would be in the "sunset years" by 2050, as the median age rose toward forty. This aging of the population raised a host of political, social, and



**Government Expenditures for Social Welfare, 1930–1995**  
 "Social welfare" includes unemployment and old-age insurance, medical insurance, and veterans' benefits. The skyrocketing costs from the mid-1960s onward reflect the increasing size (and political clout) of the elderly population, who were the main beneficiaries of Great Society programs like Medicare. The steep rise after 1970 is also explained by the galloping inflation of the 1970s.

economic questions. Elderly people formed a potent electoral bloc that aggressively lobbied for government favors and achieved real gains for senior citizens. The share of GNP spent on health care for people over sixty-five more than doubled in the three decades after the enactment of Medicare in 1965. This growth in medical payments for the old far outstripped the growth of educational expenditures for the young, with corresponding consequences for the social and economic situations of both populations. As late as the 1960s, nearly a quarter of Americans over the age of sixty-five lived



in poverty; three decades later, only about one in ten did. The figures for young people moved in the reverse direction: 15 percent of children were living in poverty in the 1970s, but over 20 percent were in the 1990s.

These triumphs for senior citizens also brought fiscal strains, especially on the Social Security system, established in 1935 to provide income for retired workers. When Social Security began, most workers continued to toil after age sixty-five. By century's end only a small minority did (about 15 percent of men and 8 percent of women), and a majority of the elderly population relied primarily on Social Security checks for their living expenses. Contrary to popular mythology, Social Security payments to retirees did not simply represent reimbursement for contributions that the elderly had made during their working lives. In fact, the payments of current workers into the Social Security system funded the benefits to the current generation of retirees. By the 1990s, those benefits had risen so high, and the ratio of active workers to retirees had dropped so low, that drastic adjust-

ments were necessary. The problem had intensified in the 1960s, when Medicare was added to the list of benefits for the elderly, and again in the 1970s, when a compassionate Congress dramatically increased retirement payments at a time when productivity growth was stalling. At the beginning of the new century, as the huge wave of post-World War II baby boomers approached retirement age, it seemed that the “unfunded liability”—the difference between what the government had promised to pay to the elderly and the taxes it expected to take in—might rise above \$7 trillion, a sum that threatened to bankrupt the Republic unless drastic reforms were adopted. Yet because of the electoral power of older Americans, Social Security and Medicare reform remained the “third rail” of American politics, which politicians touched only at their peril.

Without substantial change, larger payments to retirees could only mean smaller paychecks for workers. Three-quarters of all employees in the 1990s already paid higher Social Security taxes than income taxes. (An individual paid a maximum of \$5,829 in Social Security taxes in 2000, matched by an identical employer contribution.) A war between the generations loomed in the twenty-first century, as payments to the nonworking elderly threatened to soak up fully half the working population's income by about 2040.

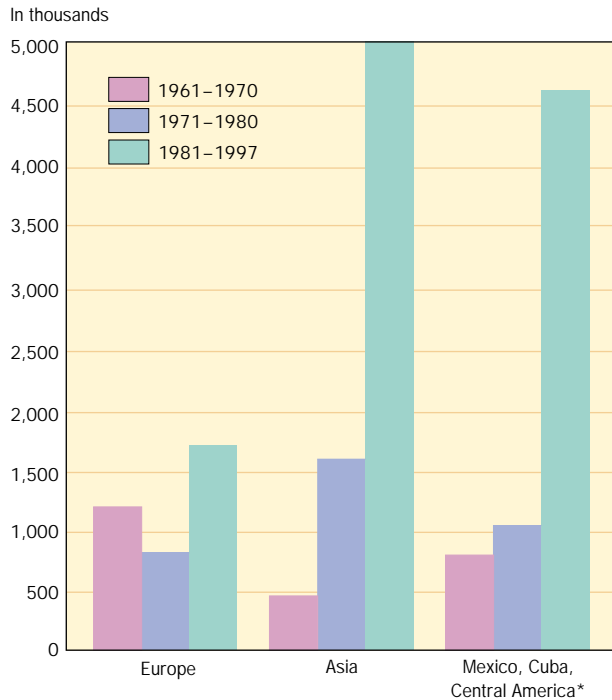
## **The New Immigration**

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Newcomers continued to flow into modern America. They washed ashore in waves that numbered nearly 1 million persons per year in the 1980s and 1990s—the heaviest inflow of immigrants in America's experience. In striking contrast to the historic pattern of immigration, Europe contributed far fewer people than did the teeming countries of Asia and Latin America, especially Mexico.

What prompted this new migration to America? The truth is that the newest immigrants came for many of the same reasons as the old. They typically left countries where populations were growing rapidly and where agricultural and industrial revolutions were shaking people loose from old habits of life—conditions almost identical to those in nineteenth-century Europe. And they came to America, as previous immigrants had done, in search of jobs and economic opportunity.



Recent Legal Immigration by Area of Origin, 1961-1997

The Southwest, from Texas to California, felt the immigrant impact especially sharply, as Mexican migrants—by far the largest contingent of modern immigrants—concentrated heavily in that region. By the turn of the century, Latinos made up nearly one-third of the population in Texas, Arizona, and

California, and almost half in New Mexico—a population shift that amounted to a demographic *reconquista* of the lands lost by Mexico in the war of 1846.

The size and geographic concentration of the Hispanic population in the Southwest had few precedents in the history of American immigration. Most previous groups had been so thinly scattered across the land that they had little choice but to learn English and make their way in the larger American society, however much they might have longed to preserve their native language and customs. But Mexican-Americans might succeed in creating a truly bicultural zone in the booming southwestern states, especially since their mother culture lies just next door and is easily accessible—another factor that differentiates this modern immigrant community from its nineteenth-century European and Asian antecedents.

Some old-stock Americans worried about the capacity of the modern United States to absorb these new immigrants. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 attempted to choke off illegal entry by penalizing employers of undocumented aliens and by granting amnesty to many of those already here. Anti-immigrant sentiment flared especially sharply in California in the wake of an economic recession in the early 1990s. California voters approved a ballot initiative that attempted to deny benefits, including education, to illegal immigrants, though courts blocked the effort. Congress in 1996 restricted access to some welfare benefits for *legal* immigrants who arrived after that year.

Yet the fact was that foreign-born people accounted for almost 10 percent of the American population by the end of the 1990s, a far smaller proportion than the historical high point of nearly 15 percent recorded in the census of 1910, but evidence nonetheless that American society continued to welcome—and need—newcomers. Somewhat inconsistently, critics charged both that immigrants robbed citizens of jobs and that they dumped themselves on the welfare rolls at the taxpayers' expense. But studies showed that immigrants took jobs scorned by Americans and that they paid more dollars in taxes (withholding and Social Security taxes, as well as sales taxes) than they claimed for welfare payments. A more urgent worry was that unscrupulous employers might take cruel advantage of alien workers, who often had scant knowledge of their legal rights.

### **Ethnic Pride**

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Thanks both to continued immigration and to their own high birthrate, Hispanic-Americans were becoming an increasingly important minority (see “Makers of America: The Latinos,” pp. 1026–1027). The United States by the late 1990s was home to more than 31 million Hispanics. They included some 21 million Chicanos, or Mexican-Americans,

mostly in the Southwest, as well as 3 million Puerto Ricans, chiefly in the Northeast, and more than 1 million Cubans in Florida (where it was jokingly said that Miami had become the most “Anglo” city in Latin America).

Flexing their political muscles, Latinos elected mayors of Miami, Denver, and San Antonio. After years of struggle, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), headed by the soft-spoken and charismatic César Chávez, succeeded in improving work conditions for the mostly Chicano “stoop laborers” who followed the cycle of planting and harvesting across the American West. Hispanic influence seemed likely to grow, as suggested by the increasing presence of Spanish-language ballots and television broadcasts. Hispanic-Americans, newly confident and organized, were destined to become the nation's largest ethnic minority, outnumbering even African-Americans, in the early twenty-first century. Indeed, by the first decade of the new century, the Chicano population of America's largest state, California, equaled the Anglo population, making the state a patchwork of minorities with no single ethnic majority.

Asian-Americans also made great strides. By the 1980s they were America's fastest-growing minority. Their numbers nearly doubled in that decade alone, thanks to heavy immigration, and continued to swell in the 1990s. Once feared and hated as the

“yellow peril” and relegated to the most menial and degrading jobs, citizens of Asian ancestry were now counted among the most prosperous and successful of Americans—a “model minority.” The typical Asian-American household enjoyed an income nearly 20 percent greater than that of the typical white household. In 1996 the voters of Washington elected the first Asian-American to serve as governor of a mainland American state.

Indians, the original Americans, shared in the general awakening of ethnic and cultural pride. The 2000 census counted some 2.4 million Native Americans, half of whom had left their reservations to live in cities. Meanwhile, unemployment and alcoholism had blighted reservation life. Many tribes tried to take advantage of their special legal status as independent nations by opening bingo halls and gambling casinos for white patrons on reservation lands, but the cycle of discrimination and poverty proved hard to break.

### **Cities and Suburbs**

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America’s “alabaster cities” of song and story grew more sooty and less safe in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Crime was the great scourge of urban life. The rate of violent crimes committed in cities reached an all-time high in the drug-infested 1980s and then leveled off in the early 1990s. The number of violent crimes even began to decline substantially in many areas after 1995. Nevertheless, murders, robberies, and rapes remained shockingly common not only in cities but also in suburbs and rural areas. America imprisoned a larger fraction of its citizens than almost any other country in the world, and some desperate citizens resorted to armed vigilante tactics to protect themselves.

Millions of Americans fled the cities altogether for the supposedly safer suburbs. So swift and massive was the exodus from the old urban neighborhoods that by the mid-1990s it ended the nation’s rather brief “urban age,” whose dawn had been heralded by the census of 1920, the first to show a majority of city dwellers.

A majority of Americans now lived in the suburbs, a historic phenomenon that many observers blamed for the spreading fragmentation and isolation of American life. Entire suburban neighborhoods, usually containing economically and racially

homogeneous populations, walled themselves off behind elaborate security systems in “gated communities.” In these safe but segregated enclaves, the sense of a larger and inclusive national community might prove hard to sustain.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, some major cities exhibited signs of renewal. Commercial redevelopment gained ground in cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. Well-to-do residents reclaimed once-fashionable neighborhoods and sent real estate values soaring. But these late-century urban homesteaders did little to make cities new centers of residential integration. Cities remained as divided by wealth and race as the suburban social landscape surrounding them.

### **Minority America**

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Racial and ethnic tensions also exacerbated the problems of American cities. These stresses were especially evident in Los Angeles, which, like New York a century earlier, was a magnet for minorities, especially immigrants from Asia and Latin America. When in 1992 a mostly white jury exonerated white Los Angeles police officers who had been videotaped ferociously beating a black suspect, the minority neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles erupted in rage. Arson and looting laid waste entire city blocks, and scores of people were killed. In a sobering demonstration of the complexity of modern American racial rivalries, many black rioters vented their anger at the white police and the judicial system by attacking Asian shopkeepers, who in turn formed armed patrols to protect their property.

The Los Angeles riots vividly testified to black skepticism about the American system of justice. Just three years later, again in Los Angeles, the gaudy televised spectacle of former football star O. J. Simpson’s murder trial fed white disillusionment with the state of race relations. After months of testimony that seemed to point to Simpson’s guilt, the jury acquitted him, presumably because certain Los Angeles police officers involved in the case had been shown to harbor racist sentiments. In a later civil trial, another jury unanimously found Simpson liable for the “wrongful deaths” of his former wife and another victim. The reaction to the Simpson

# MAKERS OF AMERICA

## The Latinos

**T**oday Mexican food is handed through fast-food drive-up windows in all fifty states, Spanish-language broadcasts fill the airwaves, and the Latino community has its own telephone book, the *Spanish Yellow Pages*. Latinos send representatives to Congress and mayors to city hall, record hit songs, paint murals, and teach history. Latinos, among the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population, include Puerto Ricans, frequent voyagers between their native island and northeastern cities; Cubans, many of them refugees from the communist dictatorship of Fidel Castro, concentrated in Miami and southern Florida; and Central Americans, fleeing the ravages of civil war in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

But the most populous group of Latinos derives from Mexico. The first significant numbers of Mexicans began heading for *El Norte* (“the North”) around 1910, when the upheavals of the Mexican

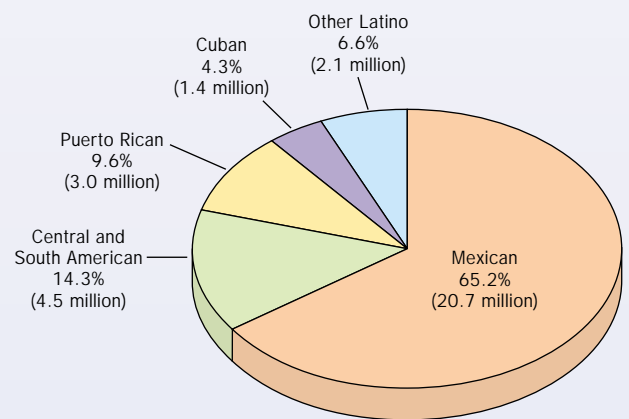
Revolution stirred and shuffled the Mexican population into more or less constant flux. Their northward passage was briefly interrupted during the Great Depression, when thousands of Mexican nationals were deported. But immigration resumed during World War II, and since then a steady flow of legal immigrants has passed through border checkpoints, joined by countless millions of their undocumented countrymen and countrywomen stealing across the frontier on moonless nights.

For the most part, these Mexicans came to work in the fields, following the ripening crops northward to Canada through the summer and autumn months. In winter many headed back to Mexico, but some gathered instead in the cities of the Southwest—El Paso, Los Angeles, Houston, and San Bernardino. There they found regular work, even if lack of skills and racial discrimination often confined them to

manual labor. City jobs might pay less than farm labor, but the work was steady and offered the prospect of a stable home. Houses may have been shabby in the barrios, but these Mexican neighborhoods provided a sense of togetherness, a place to raise a family, and the chance to join a mutual-aid society. Such societies, or *Mutualistas*, sponsored baseball leagues, helped the sick and disabled, and defended their members against discrimination.

Mexican immigrants lived so close to the border that their native country acted like a powerful magnet, drawing them back time and time again. Mexicans frequently returned to see relatives or visit the homes of their youth, and relatively few became U.S. citizens. Indeed, in many Mexican-American communities, it was a badge of dishonor to apply for U.S. citizenship.

The Mexican government, likewise influenced by the proximity of the two countries, intervened in the daily lives of its nationals in America, further discouraging them from becoming citizens of their adopted country. As Anglo reformers attempted to Americanize the immigrants in the 1910s and 1920s, the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles launched a Mexicanization program. The consulate sponsored parades on *Cinco de Mayo* ("Fifth of May"), celebrating Mexico's defeat of a French army at the Battle of Puebla in 1892, and opened special Spanish-language schools for children. Since World War II, the Ameri-



Sources of Latino Population in the United States, 1999

can-born generation has carried on the fight for political representation, economic opportunity, and cultural preservation.

Fresh arrivals from Mexico and from the other Latin American nations daily swell the Latino communities across America. The census of 2000 revealed that Latinos are now the largest minority group in the United States, surpassing African-Americans. As the United States heads into the twenty-first century, it is taking on a pronounced Spanish accent, although Latinos' reticence to vote in elections has retarded their influence on American politics.

*In 1990 the African-American intellectual Shelby Steele (b. 1946) declared in his provocative book, *The Content of Our Character*,*


“What is needed now is a new spirit of pragmatism in racial matters where blacks are seen simply as American citizens who deserve complete fairness and in some cases developmental assistance, but in no case special entitlements based on color. We need deracinated social policies that attack poverty rather than *black* poverty and that instill those values that make for self-reliance.”

wake of the civil rights gains of the 1950s and 1960s, though they still had a long hill to climb before reaching full equality. By the 1990s about 40 percent of blacks were counted in the middle class (defined as enjoying family income greater than \$25,000 per year). The number of black elected officials had risen above the seven thousand mark, including more than a thousand in the Old South, some two dozen members of Congress, and the mayors of several large cities. Voting tallies demonstrated that successful black politicians were moving beyond

verdicts revealed the yawning chasm that separated white and black America, as most whites continued to believe Simpson guilty, while a majority of African-Americans told pollsters that the original not-guilty verdict was justified. African-American charges that they had been unlawfully kept from the polls during the 2000 presidential election in Florida convinced many blacks that they were still facing a Jim Crow South of black disenfranchisement.

American cities have always held an astonishing variety of ethnic and racial groups, but in the late twentieth century, minorities made up a majority of the population of many American cities, as whites fled to the suburbs. More than three-quarters of African-Americans lived in cities by the 1990s, whereas only about one-quarter of whites did. The most desperate black ghettos, housing a hapless “underclass” in the inner core of the old industrial cities, were especially problematic. Successful blacks who had benefited from the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s followed whites to the suburbs, leaving a residue of the poorest poor in the old ghettos. Without a middle class to sustain community institutions like schools and small businesses, the inner cities, plagued by unemployment and drug addiction, seemed bereft of leadership, cohesion, resources, and hope.

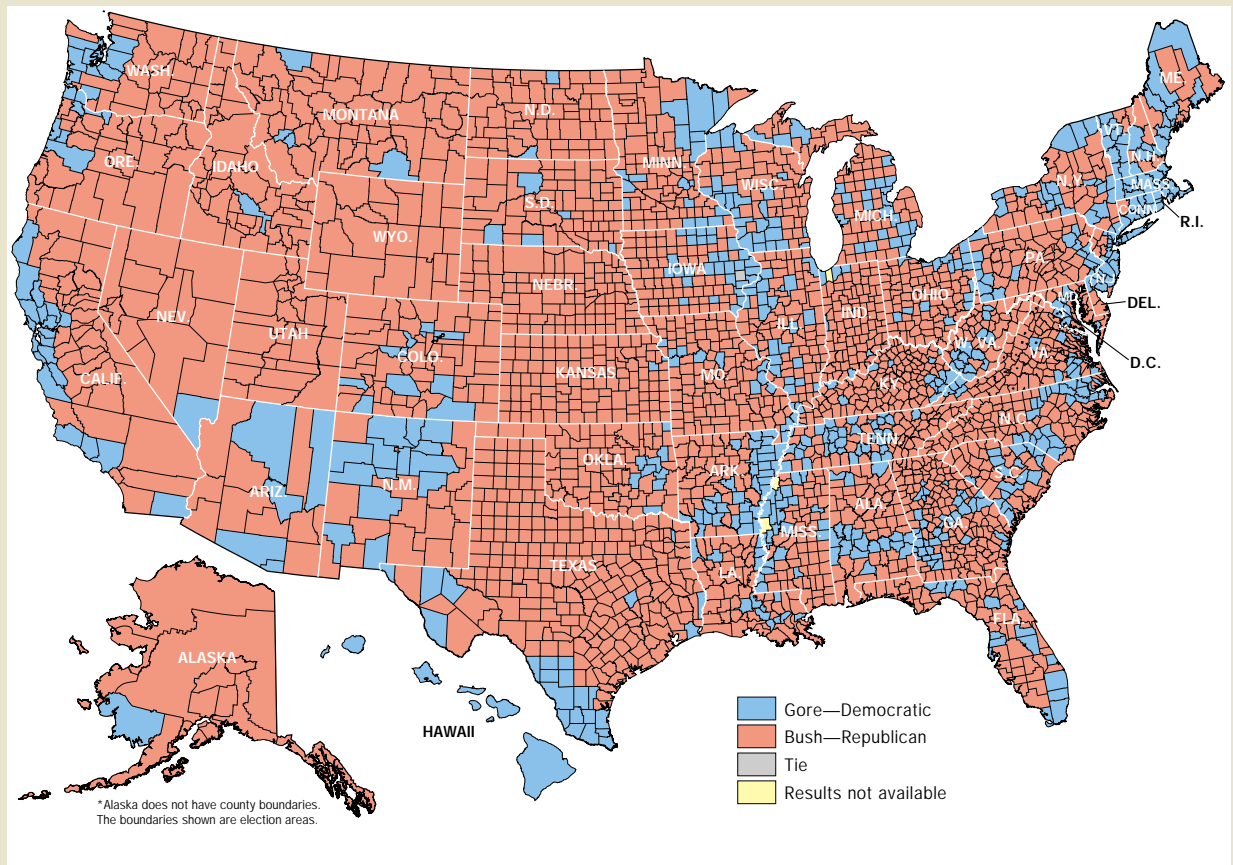
The friendless underclass, heavily composed of blacks and other minorities, represented a sorry—and dangerous—social failure that eluded any known remedy. But other segments of the African-American community had clearly prospered in the



## EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

**A Country Politically Divided Between City and Country** Computer mapping of election data has helped analysts identify patterns in Americans' political behavior. This county-level map of election-night returns from the November 2000 presidential election reveals a deadlock between urban Democrats and rural Republicans. Even though Democratic nominee Albert Gore won the popular vote, he prevailed in only 676 counties, fewer than half of what Bill Clinton had won four years earlier. Yet Gore took virtually all major cities and most of their surrounding suburbs, giving him the lead in the heavily populated coasts and most metropolitan areas in the interior. Bush, on the other hand, carried an impressive 2,477 counties, and virtually every small town on a straight line from Redding, California, to Springfield, Illinois. In the vast western plain of Republican red, cities like St. Louis,

Kansas City, Tulsa, and Las Vegas were rare outposts of Democratic blue. Gore's huge win in Portland was big enough to give him the state in the Electoral College, even though the rest of Oregon voted heavily for Bush. The division of this map into red and blue territory vividly portrays a deep cultural chasm between urban and rural America. While minorities, union members, and prospering white collar workers remained loyal to the party of Clinton, small-town white America experienced the Clinton years as an assault on their most cherished values concerning issues like abortion, gender roles, and gun ownership. What additional voting patterns does this election map reveal? How did other economic, social, and cultural issues separate Americans into these two camps? How else might computers be used for historical analysis?



(Source: Adapted from VNS Graphic by Stanford Kay-Newsweek)



isolated racial constituencies and into the political mainstream by appealing to a wide variety of voters. In 1989 Virginians, only 15 percent of whom were black, chose L. Douglas Wilder as the first African-American elected to serve as a state governor. In 1994 voters in Illinois made Carol Moseley-Braun the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Senate.

Single women headed over half of black families, almost three times the rate for whites. Many of those African-American women, husbandless and jobless, necessarily depended on welfare to feed their children. As social scientists increasingly emphasized the importance of the home environment for success in school, it became clear that many fatherless, impoverished African-American children seemed consigned to suffer from educational handicaps that were difficult to overcome. Black youths in the 1990s still had about one year less schooling than whites of the same age and were less than half as likely to earn college degrees. As the American economy became ever more driven by new applications of computers and biotechnology, these disadvantages were bound to widen the racial gap of employment opportunity. The political assault against affirmative action in California and elsewhere only compounded the obstacles to advanced training for many young African-Americans.

## **The Life of the Mind**

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Despite the mind-sapping chatter of the “boob tube,” Americans in the late twentieth century read more, listened to more music, and were better educated than ever before. By the 1990s colleges were awarding nearly a million degrees a year, and one person in four in the twenty-five-to-thirty-four-year-old age group was a college graduate. This expanding mass of educated people lifted the economy to more advanced levels while creating consumers of “high culture.” Americans annually made some 300 million visits to museums in the 1990s and patronized about a thousand opera companies and fifteen hundred symphony orchestras—as well as countless popular music groups, including the inventive performers known as Phish and the long-lived sixties survivors the Grateful Dead.

What Americans read said much about the state of American society at the dawn of the new century. Among the most striking development in American letters was the rise of authors from the once-marginal regions and ethnic groups now coming into their own. Reflecting the general population shift westward, the West became the subject of a particularly rich literary outpouring. Larry McMurtry wrote about the small-town West and

lovingly recollected the end of the cattle-drive era in *Lonesome Dove* (1985). Raymond Carver penned understated and powerful stories about working-class life in the Pacific Northwest. Annie Dillard, Ivan Doig, and Jim Harrison re-created the gritty frontier history of that same verdant region. David Guterson penned a moving tale of interracial anxiety and affection in the World War II-era Pacific Northwest in *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994). Wallace Stegner, the acknowledged dean of western writers, produced several works that far transcended their regional themes, including *Angle of Repose* (1971) and *Crossing to Safety* (1987). Norman MacLean, a former English professor who turned to fiction writing in his retirement, left two unforgettable accounts of his boyhood in Montana: *A River Runs Through It* (1976) and *Young Men and Fire* (1992).

African-American authors and artists also increasingly made their mark. Playwright August Wilson retold the history of black Americans in the twentieth century, with special emphasis on the psychic costs of the northward migration (*Fences*, 1985; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 1988; *Jitney*, 1998). In the usually lighthearted medium of the Broadway musical, George Wolfe sensitively explored sobering questions of black identity in *Jelly's Last Jam* (1992), the life story of the great New Orleans jazzman "Jelly Roll" Morton. Alice Walker gave fictional voice to the experiences of black women in her hugely popular *The Color Purple* (1982). Toni Morrison wove a bewitching portrait of maternal affection in *Beloved* (1987) and in 1993 became the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Native-Americans, too, achieved literary recognition. Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday won a Pulitzer Prize for his portrayal of Indian life in *House Made of Dawn* (1968). James Welch wrote movingly about his Blackfoot ancestors in *Fools Crow* (1986).

Asian-American authors also flourished, among them playwright David Hwang and essayist Maxine Hong Kingston, whose *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) imaginatively reconstructed the obscure lives of the earliest Chinese immigrants. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) explored the sometimes painful relationship between immigrant Indian parents and their American-born children. The older European migration continued to hold literary appeal as well, notably with Frank McCourt's memories of an Irish and American childhood, captured in *Angela's Ashes* (1996).

Women writers and women's themes forged to the fictional forefront as the feminist movement advanced. Jane Smiley modeled her touching narrative of a midwestern farm family, *A Thousand Acres* (1991), on Shakespeare's *King Lear* and followed up with a hilarious spoof of university life in *Moo* (1995). Ann Tyler penned memorable portraits of quirky characters, male as well as female, in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) and *The Accidental Tourist* (1985). E. Annie Proulx won widespread acclaim with her comical yet tender portrayal of a struggling family in *The Shipping News* (1993). The rising interest in feminist and African-American themes revived the popularity of a 1930s writer, Zora Neale Hurston, especially her naturalistic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, first published in 1937.

New York became the art capital of the world after World War II, as well-heeled Americans supported a large number of painters and sculptors. The Ford Foundation also became a major patron of the arts, as did the federal government after the creation of the tax-supported National Endowment for the Arts in 1965. The open and tradition-free American environment seemed especially congenial to the experimental mood of much modern art. Jackson Pollock pioneered abstract expressionism in

*In her touching novel The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan explored the complex dilemmas of growing up as a Chinese-American:*

"A girl is like a young tree,' [my mother] said. 'You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. . . .' Over the years I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better.

"It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing."

the 1940s and 1950s, flinging paint on huge flats stretched on his studio floor. Realistic representation went out the window, as artists like Pollock and Willem de Kooning strove to create “action paintings” that expressed the painter’s individuality and made the viewer a creative participant in defining the painting’s meaning. Pop artists in the 1960s, notably Andy Warhol, canonized on canvas everyday items of consumer culture, such as soup cans. Robert Rauschenberg made elaborate collages out of objects like cardboard boxes and newspaper clippings. Claes Oldenburg tried to stun viewers into a new visual awareness with unfamiliar versions of familiar objects, such as giant plastic sculptures of pillow-soft telephones. The venerable Georgia O’Keeffe, whose first exhibit was in 1916, continued well into the post-World War II period to produce stunningly immaculate, vividly colored paintings of her beloved Southwest, and moved increasingly into abstract works as her career progressed.

On the stage, playwright David Mamet analyzed the barbarity of American capitalism in plays like *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo*, in which he crafted a kind of poetry from the sludge of American slang. Mamet also made savage sport of feminism and “political correctness” in *Oleanna*, a biting satire about a woman student and her professor. The AIDS epidemic inspired Tony Kushner’s sensationally inventive *Angels in America*, a broad-ranging commentary, alternately hilarious and touching, about the condition of American life at century’s end. Film, the most characteristic American art form, continued to flourish, especially as a wave of younger filmmakers like George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Spike Lee, and the Coen brothers, as well as the innovative documentary artist Ken Burns, made their influence felt.

Architecture also benefited from the building boom of the postwar era. Old master Frank Lloyd Wright produced strikingly original designs, as in

the round-walled Guggenheim Museum in New York. Louis Kahn employed stark geometric forms and basic building materials like brick and concrete to make beautiful, simple buildings. Eero Saarinen, the son of a Finnish immigrant, contributed a number of imaginative structures, including two Yale University residential colleges that evoked the atmosphere of an Italian hill town. Chinese-born I. M. Pei designed numerous graceful buildings on several college campuses, as well as the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. Philip Johnson artfully rendered huge edifices intimate in structures like New York City's Seagram Building and the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center in Manhattan. "Postmodernists" such as Robert Venturi and Michael Graves, inspired by the decorative details of earlier historical styles, rejected the spare functionalism that had dominated modern architecture for much of the century.

### **The American Prospect in the Age of Terrorism**

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On September 11, 2001, America's good luck apparently ran out. Out of a crystal-clear sky, suicidal terrorists slammed two hijacked airliners, loaded with passengers and jet fuel, into the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center. They flew a third plane into the military nerve-center of the Pentagon, near Washington, D.C., killing 189 people. Heroic passengers forced another hijacked aircraft to crash in rural Pennsylvania, killing all 44 aboard but depriving the terrorists of a fourth weapon of mass destruction. As the two giant New York skyscrapers thunderously collapsed, some three thousand innocent victims perished, including peoples of many races and faiths from more than sixty countries, as well as hundreds of New York's police- and fire-department rescue workers. A stunned nation blossomed with flags, as grieving and outraged Americans struggled to express their sorrow and solidarity in the face of catastrophic terrorism.

The murderous events of that late-summer morning reanimated American patriotism. They also dramatically ended an historical era. For nearly two centuries, the United States had been spared from foreign attack against its homeland. All but unique among modern peoples, that degree of national security had undergirded the values of openness and

individual freedom that defined the distinctive character of American society. Now American security and American liberty alike were imperiled.

President Bush responded with a sober but stirring address to Congress nine days later. His solemn demeanor and the gravity of the situation helped to dissipate the cloud of illegitimacy that had shadowed his presidency since the disputed election of 2000. Warning that the struggle against terrorism would be long and messy, he pledged "we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail" until "we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies." While emphasizing his respect for the Islamic religion and Muslim peoples, he identified the principal enemy as Osama bin Laden, head of a shadowy terrorist network known as Al Qaeda ("the base" in Arabic). A wealthy extremist exiled from his native Saudi Arabia, bin Laden was associated with earlier attacks on American embassies in East Africa and on a U.S. Naval vessel in Yemen. He had taken refuge in land-locked Afghanistan, ruled by Islamic fundamentalists called the Taliban. (Ironically, the United States had indirectly helped bring the Taliban to power, when it supported religious rebels resisting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s). Bin Laden was known to harbor bitter resentments toward the United States for its economic embargo against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, its military presence on the sacred soil of the Arabian peninsula, and its support for Israel's hostility to Palestinian nationalism. Bin Laden also fed on world-wide resentment of America's enormous economic, military, and cultural power. Ironically, America's most conspicuous strengths had made it a conspicuous target.

When the Taliban refused to hand over bin Laden, Bush ordered a massive military campaign against Afghanistan. Within three months, American and Afghani rebel forces had overthrown the Taliban and were poised to flush bin Laden out of the fortified underground sanctuary where he was believed to have holed up.

The campaign in Afghanistan impressively demonstrated the wallop and sophistication of American air power and "smart," precision-guided munitions. But it remained an open question whether in the longer run America's high-tech arsenal would prove effective against foes so elusive, zealous, and determined—foes who sought not simply to destroy the United States but to demoralize it, perhaps to corrupt its very soul. Behind bin Laden lurked countless terrorist "cells" in several dozen countries, some of

them possibly in possession of biochemical or even nuclear weapons. Some alarmed critics even warned that the events of September 11 heralded the onset of a protracted clash of civilizations, pitting millions of Muslims desperate to defend their traditional faith and culture against the relentlessly modernizing forces of the western world, spearheaded by the United States. Confronted with this unconventional, diffuse menace, anti-terrorism experts called for new tactics of “a-symmetrical warfare,” employing not just traditional military muscle, but innovative intelligence-gathering, economic reprisals, infiltration of suspected organizations, and even assassinations. The new war against terror also compelled the Bush administration to back away from the unilateralist foreign policies it had pursued in its early months and seek anti-terrorist partners around the globe, as evidenced by the surprisingly warm relationship that

emerged after September 11 between the United States and its former adversary, Russia.

The terrorists’ blows diabolically coincided with the onset of a recession. The already gathering economic downdraft worsened as edgy Americans shunned air travel and the tourist industry withered. Then, while the rubble in New York was still smoldering, a handful of Americans died after receiving letters contaminated with the deadly respiratory disease, anthrax. The gnawing fear spread that biological warfare would be the next threat facing the American people.

In this anxious atmosphere, Congress rammed through the USA-Patriot Act, permitting extensive telephone and e-mail surveillance, and authorizing the detention and deportation of immigrants suspected of terrorism. The Justice Department meanwhile rounded up hundreds of immigrants and held them without habeas corpus (formal charges in an open court). The Bush administration further called for trying suspected terrorists before military tribunals, where the usual rules of evidence and procedure did not apply. Public opinion polls showed Americans sharply divided on whether the terrorist threat fully warranted such drastic encroachments on America’s ancient traditions of civil liberties.

Catastrophic terrorism posed an unprecedented challenge to the United States, but the world’s oldest republic remained resilient and resourceful. Born as a revolutionary force in a world of conservatism, the United States had emerged in the twentieth century as a conservative force in a world of revolution. It held aloft the banner of liberal democracy in a world wracked by revolutions of the right and left, including fascism, Nazism, and communism. Yet through it all, much that was truly revolutionary also remained a part of America’s liberal democratic heritage, as its people pioneered in revolutions against colonialism, racism, sexism, ignorance, and poverty.

The terrorist threat reminded Americans of the urgency of resolving the ethnic and cultural conflicts that continued to plague the planet after the Cold War’s end—and of the urgency of making America’s own character better understood around the world. Americans still aspired to live up to Lincoln’s prediction that they and their heritage represented “the last best hope of earth”—but in the twenty-first century they would have to work harder than ever to prove it, to themselves as well as to others.

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For further reading, see page A29 of the Appendix. For web resources, go to <http://college.hmco.com>.

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