

Historical Background

The Contemporary Period (1970–Present)

When they created the United States, the American founders set out to build a democratic republic in a natural paradise. They established a great nation, and they foresaw its leadership role, but they could hardly have imagined how interconnected and interdependent all the nations of the world would become by the twenty-first century. At the nation's beginning, Americans celebrated the New World. Now, as part of the global community, Americans are shaping a *new* New World.

Politics and Space The Bicentennial of the United States in 1976 highlighted pride in the American accomplishment. Even though the nation was still recovering from the traumas of the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair—the burglary of Democratic Party headquarters that forced the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974—Americans celebrated the nation's 200th birthday with great pride. Space exploration offered an escape from politics, especially the triumph of the space shuttle. The first American woman in space, Sally Ride, was part of the crew of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1983.

Leadership and Conflict Voters sent Ronald Reagan, the popular governor of California, to the White House in 1980 and again in 1984 with a landslide victory. George Bush, Reagan's vice president, was elected to the presidency in 1988. Seeking reelection in 1992, Bush faced a tough fight against high unemployment, a recession, and growing dissatisfaction with government. Democrat Bill Clinton and his running mate Al Gore—the youngest ticket in American history—won the election. Clinton won reelection in 1996, but in 2000 Al Gore lost to George Bush's son, George W. Bush, in an election that was extremely controversial. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush was reelected in 2004. As the nation chose a new leader in 2008, Americans continued to face the violent consequences of the Middle Eastern conflict.

TIMELINE



1970

1970: At Kent State University, four students are killed by the National Guard while protesting the Vietnam War.

1971: Chile Poet Pablo Neruda wins the Nobel Prize for Literature.

◀ **1971:** Walt Disney World opens in Florida, becoming one of the top travel destinations in the world.

1972: China President Nixon makes a historic visit to China.

▼ **1972:** Last U.S. combat troops leave Vietnam.



The Computer Age With the introduction of the microprocessor in the 1970s, American life shifted. Computers that began as military and business tools soon became personal companions. The Internet has made information and entertainment available at any time to anyone with a desktop computer, a laptop, or a cellphone. Ever smaller, faster, and easier, technology can now connect anyone with everyone electronically, raising new questions of privacy and personal relations. "Mail" has a new meaning and "text" has become a verb. Workers "telecommute" and fans "download" their favorites. From how your government runs to how you gossip with your friends, computers have transformed virtually every aspect of life in America.

The New Millennium Despite the speed of technological change, however, some of the oldest issues still dominate human affairs. What is our relationship to the natural world? How can people of different cultures live together peacefully? How can people build a better future? One thing is certain: As the new millennium moves forward, America will continue to change and Americans will continue to explore new aspects of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Key Historical Theme: Creating the Future

- Americans celebrated two hundred years of progress and democracy during the 1976 Bicentennial.
- Americans struggle with political and economic problems at home while dealing with intense international conflicts.
- Americans live in a time of accelerated technological change that makes life easier and raises new questions.
- Americans work toward creating the future while facing persistent issues, such as care of the natural world.



◀ **1974:** Nixon resigns as president following exposure of his involvement in the Watergate scandals.

1978

◀ **1973:** The Sears Tower is built in Chicago, becoming the world's tallest building.



1973: Africa A seven-year drought results in the starvation of 100,000 people.

1975: Francisco Franco dies, ending his dictatorship that began with the Spanish Civil War.