

What accounted for the growth of conservatism in the 1970s?

If the Vietnam War unsettled Americans' faith in their leaders and foreign policy, the era's economic downturn generated criticism of domestic policies ranging from tax rates to social welfare programs to school busing. Richard Nixon's presidency reflected the impact of the conservative movement as well as the challenges of governing in troubled economic times. The Republican acquiesced in continuing many Great Society social welfare programs and even approved pathbreaking environmental, minority, and women's rights measures (see [chapter 28](#)). Yet his public rhetoric and some of his actions signaled a move to the right. Many Americans would move with him.

Just two years after Nixon won reelection by a huge margin, his abuse of power and efforts to cover up crimes committed by subordinates forced the first presidential resignation in history. His Republican successor, Gerald Ford, served only two years, but the political spectrum continued to shift rightward even when Democrat Jimmy Carter captured the White House in 1976.

The End of the Boom

Whereas Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson had all governed during a period of prosperity, Nixon faced a considerably less auspicious economic climate. By 1970, both inflation and unemployment had surpassed 6 percent, an unprecedented combination that experts dubbed “stagflation.”

Domestic troubles were compounded by the decline of American dominance in the international economy. With Japan and Western Europe fully recovered from the devastation of World War II, foreign cars and electronic equipment now competed favorably with American goods. In 1971, for the first time in decades, the United States imported more than it exported, meaning the nation could no longer back up its currency with gold reserves. Nixon abandoned the gold standard and devalued the dollar to increase exports by making them cheaper.

Economic crises and energy shortages induced Nixon to intervene in the private marketplace. To protect domestic manufacturers, he imposed a surcharge on most imports, and he froze wages and prices, thus enabling the government to stimulate the economy without fueling inflation. In the short run, these policies worked. Yet by 1974, unemployment had crept back up and inflation soared.

Skyrocketing energy prices worsened stagflation. During the postwar economic boom, abundant domestic oil deposits and access to cheap Middle Eastern oil had encouraged the building of large cars and skyscrapers with no concern for fuel efficiency. By the 1970s, the United States was consuming a stunning one-third of the world's fuel resources.

In the fall of 1973, the United States faced its first energy shortage. Arab nations, furious at the Nixon administration's support of Israel during the Yom Kippur War, cut off oil shipments to the United States. Long lines formed at gas stations, and prices nearly doubled. In response, Nixon authorized temporary emergency measures allocating petroleum and establishing a national 55-mile-per-hour speed limit to save gasoline. The energy crisis eased, but the nation would not easily come to grips with its seemingly unquenchable demand for fuel and dependence on foreign oil.



AP Photo/Marty Lederhandler.

Gas Station Lines During America's first oil crisis, customers at gas stations encountered around-the-block lines as well as skyrocketing prices, rationing, and signs reading "out of gas." Americans surveyed by pollsters ranked the energy crisis a more pressing concern even than the Watergate scandal. Here, cars line up in New York City on December 23, 1973.

Nixon Courts the Right

Nixon's calls for "law and order," his attacks on antiwar protesters, his exploitation of white resistance to integration, and his criticism of the Warren Court were part of a "southern strategy" intended to bring white southerners and northerners alike into the Republican Party. His reelection in 1972 revealed this strategy's success, as well as the growing strength of the conservative movement.

In his 1968 campaign, Nixon billed himself as the candidate of “those who did not indulge in violence, those who did not break the law.” A new emphasis on containing crime, begun in Johnson’s administration, spoke to fears of social disorder in the aftermath of black urban uprisings and mass protests. Starting in the 1970s, increased funding for law enforcement and prisons would lead to unparalleled levels of incarceration in the United States, and particularly of African Americans. Nixon also pledged to represent the “forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators,” a group he called the “[silent majority](#).” Some of his appeals were racially coded, playing on hostility to new civil rights policies that seemed to favor minorities over white working people.

One of these hot-button issues was busing to achieve school integration. Nixon reluctantly enforced court orders to achieve high degrees of integration in southern schools, but he resisted such efforts outside the South. In northern and western cities, where segregation resulted from housing discrimination and the drawing of school district boundaries, half of all African American children attended nearly all-black schools. To achieve desegregation, courts began to order busing, the transfer of students between schools in white and black neighborhoods.

Children had been riding buses to school for decades, but busing in the service of court-mandated racial integration provoked fury. Violence erupted in Boston in 1974 when a district judge ordered busing. The whites most affected came from working-class families. Left in cities abandoned by the more affluent, their children now often rode buses to predominantly black, overcrowded schools with deficient facilities. Clarence McDonough denounced the liberal officials who bused his “kid half way around Boston so that a bunch of politicians can end up their careers with a clear conscience.” African American parents were also conflicted about sending their children on long rides to schools where white teachers and students might resent their presence.

Although whites eventually became more accepting of integration, many simply flocked to the white-majority suburbs. Nixon was unable to persuade Congress to end court-ordered busing; however, once he appointed four new justices, the Supreme Court imposed strict limits on its use to achieve racial balance.

Nixon’s judicial appointments would over time weaken other liberal initiatives. He charged the justices of the Warren Court with being “unprecedentedly politically active ... using their interpretation of the law to remake American society according to their own social, political, and ideological precepts.” When Chief Justice Earl Warren resigned in 1969,

Nixon replaced him with Warren E. Burger, who was inclined to interpret the Constitution narrowly and to limit government intervention on behalf of individual rights. While the Burger Court did curb protections of individual rights, it also upheld many liberal programs, including affirmative action. Its ruling in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), for example, allowed universities to remedy the results of past discrimination in their admissions policies so long as they did not employ strict quotas and racial classifications.

Nixon's southern strategy and other repercussions of the civil rights revolution ended the Democratic hold on the "solid South." Beginning in 1964, a number of conservative southern Democrats changed their party affiliation; by 2018, Republicans controlled nearly every southern state legislature, every governorship, and every Senate seat.

The Election of 1972

Nixon's reelection prospects in 1972 were good. Although the war in Vietnam continued, antiwar protests ebbed with the decrease in American ground forces and casualties. Nixon's economic initiatives had temporarily checked inflation and unemployment, and his attacks on busing and antiwar protesters had won strong support from the right.

South Dakota senator George S. McGovern was his Democratic opponent, nominated by a diverse slate of women, minority, and youthful delegates. Republicans portrayed McGovern as a left-wing extremist, tagging him as the candidate of “Acid, Amnesty, and Abortion” — that is, the choice of the counterculture, draft resisters, and feminists. More worrisome for Democrats, McGovern’s support for busing, a generous welfare program, and immediate withdrawal from Vietnam alienated some in his own party.

Nixon achieved a landslide victory, winning 60.7 percent of the popular vote and every state except Massachusetts. Although the Democrats held on to Congress, Nixon won majorities among traditional Democrats: southerners, Catholics, urbanites, and blue-collar workers. The president, however, had little time to savor his triumph, as revelations began to emerge about crimes committed to ensure his victory.

The Watergate Scandal

During the early-morning hours of June 17, 1972, five men working for Nixon’s reelection crept into the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. Intending to repair a bugging device installed in an earlier break-in, they were discovered and

arrested. Nixon and his aides then tried to cover up the burglars' connection to his administration, setting in motion the scandal reporters dubbed [Watergate](#).

Nixon was not the first president to lie to the public or misuse power. Every president since Franklin D. Roosevelt had enlarged the powers of the office in the name of national security. This expansion of executive powers, commonly referred to as the "imperial presidency," weakened traditional checks and balances on the executive branch and opened the door to abuses. No president, however, had dared go as far as Nixon, who treated opposition to his policies as a personal attack and was willing to violate the Constitution to stop it.

After the Watergate arrests, Nixon plotted to conceal links between the burglars and the White House. Nearly a year later, after investigations by a grand jury and the Senate suggested that White House aides had been involved in a cover-up, Nixon accepted official responsibility for Watergate but denied any knowledge of the break-in. Nixon also authorized the appointment of an independent special prosecutor to conduct an investigation.

Meanwhile, a Senate investigating committee uncovered the administration's projects to harass "enemies" through tax audits and other illegal means and implicated the president

in efforts to cover up the Watergate break-in. When it was revealed that all conversations in the Oval Office had been taped, a legal battle ensued. Nixon refused to hand over the tapes, citing executive privilege and separation of powers, but the Supreme Court unanimously ruled to order their release.

Nixon's misuse of federal funds and tax evasion also came to light. In August 1973, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned after having been found to accept bribes while governor of Maryland, and he was replaced by House minority leader Gerald Ford of Michigan. The next winter, the House of Representatives began an impeachment investigation, and Nixon began to release edited transcripts of the tapes. The transcripts revealed Nixon's orders to aides in March 1973: "I don't give a shit what happens. I want you all to stonewall it, let them plead the Fifth Amendment, cover up or anything else, if it'll save it — save the plan."

In July 1974, the House Judiciary Committee voted to impeach the president on three counts — obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress — and it seemed certain that the House would follow suit. "The prisons of Georgia are full of people who stole \$5 or \$10," remarked Georgia state legislator and civil rights activist Julian Bond, "and this man tried to steal the Constitution."

To avoid impeachment, Nixon announced his resignation to a national television audience on August 8, 1974 — a singular moment in U.S. history.

The Ford Presidency and the 1976 Election

Nixon's successor, Gerald R. Ford, would be left to grapple with the aftermath of Watergate as well as severe economic problems. Upon taking office, President Ford announced, "Our long national nightmare is over." But he shocked many Americans one month later by granting Nixon a pardon for any and all offenses he may have committed during his presidency. By contrast, thirty of the former president's associates ultimately pleaded guilty to or were convicted of crimes related to Watergate. Ford's sweeping pardon saved Nixon from nearly certain indictment and trial, provoking a tremendous outcry from Congress and the public.

Democrats made impressive gains in the November congressional elections, many of them pledging to guard against the kinds of abuses revealed during Watergate. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974 established public financing of presidential campaigns and imposed some restrictions on contributions to curtail the selling of political favors. Congressional legislation had little impact, however. Politicians found other ways of raising money — for

example, through political action committees (PACs) that permitted larger contributions than were allowed for individual candidates. The Supreme Court also struck down limitations on campaign spending as violations of freedom of speech. Ever-larger campaign donations flowed to candidates from interest groups, corporations, labor unions, and wealthy individuals.

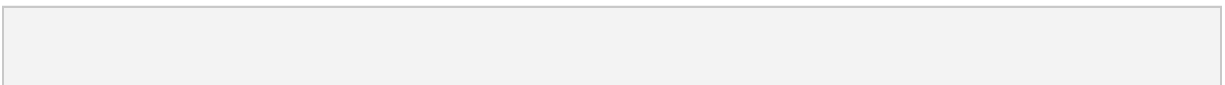
Congressional investigating committees discovered a host of illegal FBI and CIA activities stretching back to the 1950s, including surveillance of American citizens such as Martin Luther King Jr., harassment of political dissenters, and plots to assassinate Fidel Castro and other foreign leaders. In response to these revelations, President Ford placed new controls on covert operations, and Congress created permanent committees to oversee the intelligence agencies. Yet these measures did little to diminish the public's cynicism about their government, nor did they seriously hamstring the CIA.

Dissatisfaction with the Ford administration grew as the nation struggled with serious economic problems, including a low rate of economic growth, high unemployment, a foreign trade deficit, and soaring energy prices. Ford carried these burdens into the election campaign of 1976, while contending with a major challenge from the Republican right. Blasting Nixon's and Ford's foreign policy of détente

for causing the “loss of U.S. military supremacy,” California governor Ronald Reagan came close to capturing the nomination.

The Democrats nominated James Earl “Jimmy” Carter Jr., former governor of Georgia. A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Carter spent seven years as a nuclear engineer in the navy before returning to Plains, Georgia, to run the family peanut farming business. Carter stressed his faith as a born-again Christian and his distance from the government in Washington. He selected liberal senator Walter F. Mondale of Minnesota as his running mate, but Carter’s nomination nonetheless marked a rightward turn in the Democratic Party.

In the wake of Watergate, Carter was an appealing candidate. He carried his own bags, lived modestly, and taught a Bible class at his Baptist church. Ford’s failure to tackle the country’s economic problems helped Carter win the traditional Democratic coalition of blacks, organized labor, and ethnic groups and even recapture some of the white southerners who had voted for Nixon in 1972. Still, Carter received just 50 percent of the popular vote to Ford’s 48 percent, while Democrats retained substantial margins in Congress.



REVIEW

How did Nixon's policies reflect the increasing influence of conservatives in the Republican Party?

What challenges did the Carter administration face?

Jimmy Carter promised to lead a government that was “competent” as well as “decent, open, fair, and compassionate.” He employed less soaring rhetoric than had Kennedy or Johnson, cautioning Americans “that even our great Nation has its recognized limits,” and “that we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems.”

Carter’s humility and personal integrity helped revive trust in the presidency. He made notable advances in environmental and energy policies, championed human rights, and achieved foreign policy successes concerning the Panama Canal, China, and the Middle East.

Yet Carter’s administration was beset by domestic and foreign problems, exposing his deficiencies in working with Congress and rallying public opinion. Energy shortages and stagflation worsened as the 1970s progressed. And near the end of his term, Soviet-American relations deteriorated, new crises emerged in the Middle East, and the economy plummeted, dooming his reelection campaign.

A Retreat from Liberalism

Carter vowed “to help the poor and aged, to improve education, and to provide jobs,” but at the same time “not to waste money.” When these goals conflicted, budget balancing took priority over reform. Carter’s approach pleased Americans unhappy about their tax dollars being used to benefit the disadvantaged while stagflation eroded their own standard of living. But his fiscal stringency frustrated liberal Democrats pushing for comprehensive welfare reform, national health insurance, and a substantial jobs program.

Carter did fulfill liberals’ desire to make government more inclusive by appointing unprecedented numbers of women and minorities to cabinet, judicial, and diplomatic posts. A number of factors, however, thwarted Carter’s policy goals. His outsider status helped him win the election but left him without strong ties to party leaders in Congress. Equally significant, the economic problems he inherited — unemployment, inflation, and sluggish growth — confounded economic doctrine. Usually, rising prices accompanied a humming economy with a strong demand for labor. In the 1970s, however, stagflation burdened the economy with both steep inflation and high unemployment, enlarging the federal budget deficit. The economist who developed a measure of the phenomenon gave it an apt title: the “misery index.”

As Americans struggled with inflation and unemployment, many found themselves paying higher taxes, especially higher property taxes as the value of their homes increased. Some were incensed to see their taxes fund government programs for people they considered undeserving. In the 1970s, a grassroots antitax movement gathered steam. In 1978, Californians revolted in a popular referendum, slashing property taxes and limiting the state legislature's ability to raise other revenues. What a newspaper called a "primal scream by the People against Big Government" quickly spread to other states.

Carter's response to these economic woes was to target unemployment through public works and public service jobs programs and by cutting taxes. Unemployment receded, but then inflation surged. Working people, wrote one journalist, "winced and ached" as their paychecks bought less and less, "hollowing their hopes and dreams, their plans for a house or their children's college education." To curb inflation, Carter curtailed federal spending, and the Federal Reserve Board tightened the money supply. These measures failed to halt inflation, which surpassed 13 percent in 1980; worse, they contributed to rising unemployment, reversing the gains made in Carter's first two years.

Carter's refusal to put forward a comprehensive national health insurance plan, long a Democratic priority, signaled a

retreat from the expansive liberalism of the 1960s. So did his sharp cut of the capital gains tax, which benefited corporations and the wealthy, along with the government's bailout of the auto giant Chrysler to prevent bankruptcy. Congress also acted on Carter's proposals to deregulate airlines in 1978 and then the banking, trucking, and railroad industries in 1980, a policy shift in line with conservatives' insistence on a free market and unfettered private enterprise.

Energy and Environmental Reform

Complicating the battle with stagflation was the nation's enormous energy consumption and dependence on foreign oil. Carter elevated the importance of this issue by establishing the Department of Energy and proposing a wide-ranging conservation program. The [National Energy Act of 1978](#) that made it through Congress penalized manufacturers of gas-guzzling automobiles and provided other incentives for conservation and development of alternative fuels, such as wind and solar power. The act, however, fell far short of a long-term, comprehensive solution.

In 1979, a new upheaval in the Middle East, the Iranian revolution, triggered the most severe energy crisis yet. In

midsummer, shortages caused 60 percent of gasoline stations to close down, resulting in long lines and high prices. In response, Congress reduced controls on the oil and gas industry to stimulate American production and imposed a windfall profits tax on producers to redistribute some of the profits they would reap from deregulation.

European nations were no less dependent on foreign oil than was the United States, but they more successfully controlled consumption. They levied high taxes on gasoline, encouraging people to use public transportation and manufacturers to produce more energy-efficient cars. In the automobile-dependent United States, however — with inadequate public transit, a sprawling population, and an aversion to taxes — politicians dismissed that approach. By the end of the century, the United States, with 6 percent of the world's population, consumed more than 25 percent of global oil production.

A vigorous environmental movement opposed nuclear energy as an alternative fuel, warning of radiation leakage, potential accidents, and the hazards of radioactive wastes. In 1976, hundreds of people went to jail for attempting to block construction of a nuclear power plant in Seabrook, New Hampshire. The perils of nuclear energy attracted international attention in March 1979, when a meltdown of the reactor core was narrowly averted at the nuclear facility

near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Popular opposition and the great expense of building nuclear power plants limited development of the industry.

A disaster at Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York, advanced other environmental goals by underscoring the human costs of unregulated development. Residents suffering high rates of serious illness discovered that their homes sat atop highly toxic waste products from a nearby chemical company. Finally responding to the residents' claims in 1978, the state of New York agreed to help families relocate, and the Carter administration in 1980 created the so-called Superfund: \$1.6 billion for cleanup of hazardous wastes left by the chemical industry.

Carter also signed bills to improve clean air and water programs, to expand the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) preserve in Alaska, and to control strip mining, which left destructive scars on the land. During the 1979 gasoline crisis, Carter attempted to balance the development of domestic fuel sources with environmental concerns, winning legislation to conserve energy and to provide incentives for the development of solar energy and environmentally friendly alternative fuels.

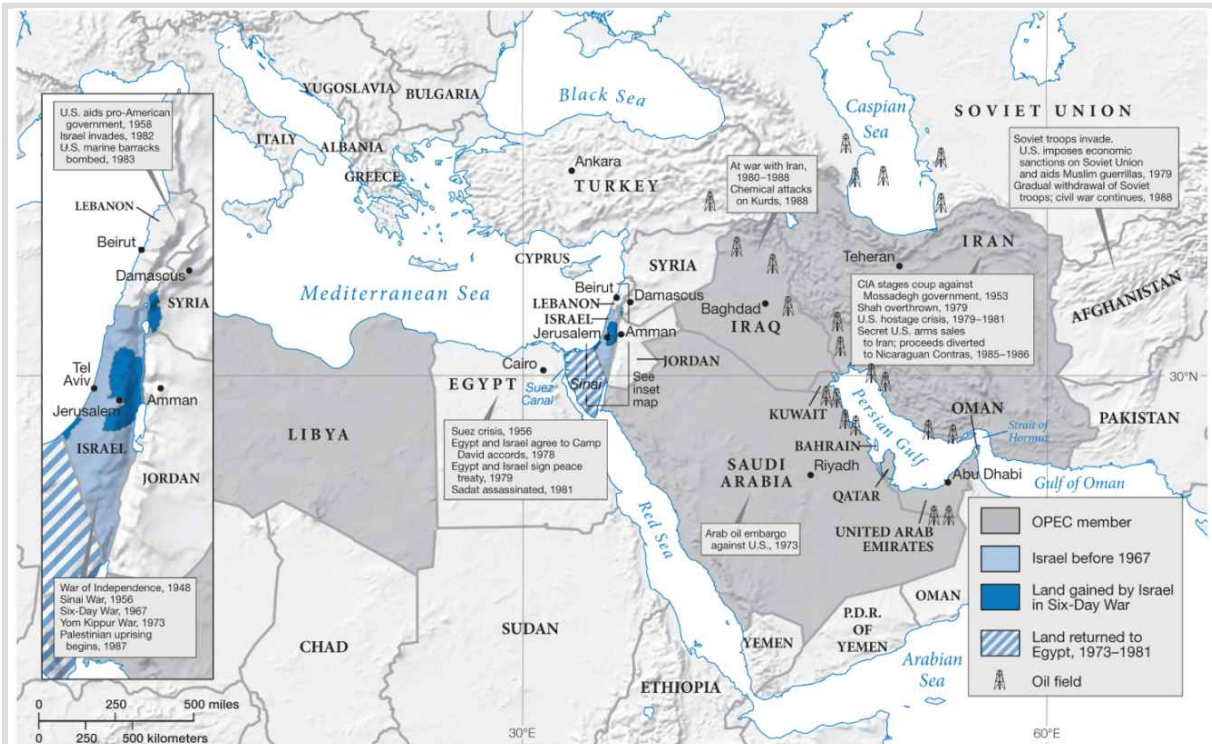
Promoting Human Rights Abroad

“We’re ashamed of what our government is as we deal with other nations around the world,” Jimmy Carter charged, pledging to reverse U.S. support of dictators, secret diplomacy, interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and excessive reliance on military solutions. Human rights formed the cornerstone of his approach. The Carter administration applied economic pressure on governments that denied their citizens basic rights, refusing aid or trading privileges to nations such as Chile and El Salvador, as well as to the white minority governments of Rhodesia and South Africa. In other cases, however, Carter prioritized strategic and security considerations over human rights principles, invoking no sanctions against repressive governments in Iran, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Carter’s human rights commitment faced a test when a popular movement overthrew an oppressive dictatorship in Nicaragua. U.S. officials were uneasy about the leftist Sandinistas who led the rebellion and had ties to Cuba. Once the Sandinistas assumed power in 1979, however, Carter held to his human rights stance, recognizing the new government and sending economic aid.

Applying moral principles to the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal, Carter signed a treaty in 1977 providing for its return to Panama in 2000. Supporters viewed the treaty as restitution for the use of U.S. power to gain control of the territory in 1903. Opponents denounced the loss of the vital waterway. “We bought it, we paid for it, it’s ours,” claimed Ronald Reagan during the presidential primaries of 1976. Only after a massive effort by the administration would the Senate ratify the Panama Canal treaty.

Carter also nurtured meaningful steps toward peace in the Middle East, seizing on the courage of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, the first Arab leader to risk his political career by talking directly with Israeli officials. In 1979, Carter invited Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin to Camp David, Maryland, where he applied tenacious diplomacy for thirteen days. These talks led to the [Camp David accords](#), whereby Egypt became the first Arab state to recognize Israel, and Israel agreed to gradual withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, which it had seized in the 1967 Six-Day War ([Map 29.3](#)).



Roark et al., *The American Promise*, 8e, Value Edition © 2020 Bedford/St. Martin's

MAP 29.3 The Middle East, 1948-1989

Preserving access to the rich oil reserves of the Middle East and commitment to the security of Israel were fundamental — and often conflicting — principles of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Description

"O P E C member: Libya in the West; Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in the South; Iraq and Iran in the North. A callout pointing at Iraq reads, At war with Iran, 1980 to 1988; Chemical attacks on Kurds, 1988.

An inset map shows:

Land gained by Israel in Six-Day War: Syria and Jerusalem; Israel before 1967: Tel Aviv. War of Independence, 1948 Sinai War, 1956 Six-Day War, 1967 Yom Kippur War, 1973 Palestinian uprising begins, 1987. U.S. aids pro-American government, 1958 Israel invades 1982 U.S. marine barracks bombed, 1983.

Land returned to Egypt, 1973 to 1981: Sinai.

Oil field: Ankara in Turkey, Tehran in Iran, Oman, Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, Baghdad in Iraq, Kuwait and Bahrain.

Callouts point to specific regions and read as follows:

Iran: CIA stages coup against Mossadegh government, 1953; Shah overthrown, 1979; U. S. hostage crisis, 1979 to 1981; Secret U. S. arms sales to Iran; proceeds diverted to Nicaraguan Contras, 1985 to 1986.

Afghanistan: Soviet troops invade; U. S. imposes economic sanctions on Soviet Union and aids Muslim guerrillas, 1979; Gradual withdrawal of Soviet troops; civil war continues, 1988.

Iraq: At war with Iran, 1980 to 1988; Chemical attacks on Kurds, 1988.

Saudi Arabia: Arab oil embargo against U. S., 1973.

Israel: War of Independence, 1948; Sinai War, 1956; Six-Day War, 1967; Yom Kippur War, 1973; Palestinian uprising begins, 1987.

Lebanon: U. S. aids pro-American government, 1958; Israel invades, 1982; U. S. Marine barracks bombed, 1983.

Egypt: Suez crisis, 1956; Egypt and Israel agree to Camp David accords, 1978; Egypt and Israel sign peace treaty, 1979; Sadat assassinated, 1981.

The map also shows Pakistan, Soviet Union, Gulf of Oman, Strait of Hormuz, Oman, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, R. D. R. of Yemen, Yemen, Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Egypt, Libya, the Mediterranean Sea, Cyprus, Syria, Greece, Albania, Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea."

New Foreign Crises

Consistent with his human rights approach, Carter preferred to promote national security through nonmilitary means and initially sought cooperation with the nation's Cold War enemies. Following up on Nixon's initiatives, in 1979 he opened formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and signed a second strategic arms reduction treaty with the Soviet Union.

That same year, however, Carter pursued a military buildup when the Soviet Union invaded neighboring Afghanistan, whose recently installed Communist government was threatened by Muslim opposition. Carter imposed economic sanctions on the Soviet Union, barred U.S. participation in the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow, and obtained legislation requiring all nineteen-year-old men to register for the draft.

Claiming that Soviet actions in Afghanistan jeopardized oil supplies from the Middle East, the president announced the "Carter Doctrine," threatening the use of any means necessary to prevent an outside force from gaining control of the Persian Gulf. His human rights policy fell by the wayside as the United States stepped up support for the military dictatorship in neighboring Pakistan, and the CIA funneled secret aid to the Afghan rebels. The thaw in superpower relations that had begun in the 1960s had ended.

Events in Iran also encouraged this hard-line approach. Generous U.S. arms and aid funneled to the shah had not subdued Iranian dissidents, who still resented the CIA's role in the overthrow of the Mossadegh government in 1953 (see [chapter 26](#)). Opponents of the shah condemned his brutal attempts to quash opposition and detested his adoption of Western culture and values. These grievances fueled a revolution in 1979 that forced him out and brought to power Shiite Islamic fundamentalists led by Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini.

Carter's decision to allow the shah into the United States for medical treatment enraged Iranians, who believed that the United States would restore him to power, as it had done in 1953. On November 4, 1979, a crowd broke into the U.S. Embassy in Iran's capital of Teheran and seized sixty-six U.S. diplomats, CIA officers, citizens, and military attachés. Refusing the captors' demands to return the shah to Iran for trial, Carter froze Iranian assets in U.S. banks and placed an embargo on Iranian oil. In April 1980, he sent a small military operation into Iran to rescue the hostages, but the mission failed.

The disastrous rescue attempt and scenes of blindfolded American citizens paraded before TV cameras fed a sense of U.S. impotence, simmering since the defeat in Vietnam. Iran released a handful of the captives (primarily women and

African Americans), but the [Iran hostage crisis](#) — lasting 444 days — dominated the news during the 1980 presidential campaign and contributed to Carter’s defeat. In a final blow, Iran freed the remaining fifty-two hostages minutes after Carter left office. The hostages boarded a plane in Teheran as his successor, Ronald Reagan, delivered his inaugural address.



AP Photo.

Iran Hostage Crisis Iranian demonstrators show their support for the militants who seized the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, taking sixty-six Americans hostage. In this photograph from November 13, 1979, demonstrators inside the embassy burn an effigy of Uncle Sam, a reference to the CIA visible on one arm.

REVIEW

How did Carter put into practice his commitment to human rights, and when and why did this commitment give way to other priorities?

Conclusion: How did the constraints of the 1970s reshape U.S. policy and politics?

American military and economic might suffered severe blows in the 1970s. Defeat in Vietnam did not make the United States the “pitiful, helpless giant” predicted by Nixon, but it did signify a relative decline of U.S. power and the impossibility of containment on a global scale.

Overestimating the effectiveness of American technological superiority, U.S. officials badly misjudged the tenacity of a revolutionary movement determined to achieve national independence, and they failed to realize how easily the United States could be perceived as an imperial intruder.

There would be other setbacks — both domestic and geopolitical — in the 1970s, ranging from the Watergate scandal to the Iran hostage crisis. The Vietnam War created deep political fractures and a distrust of the federal government that would linger long after. Large military outlays led to budget deficits, triggering inflation and contributing to ongoing economic crises. Energy shortages and spikes in gasoline prices, along with stagflation in the 1970s announced a decisive end to post-World War II prosperity. Americans chafed against this new age of limits.

Some, including a good number of traditional Democrats, responded by voting down taxes, withdrawing their support for sixties-era social welfare programs, and moving rightward in their politics.