

The History of the 1990s

Political Events Overview:

War, scandal, political reform, terrorism, and civil rights marked the 1990s. The cold war (the period of heightened tension after World War II between the former Soviet Union and the United States) ended with the collapse of communism early in the decade. In response, President George H. W. Bush called for a "new world order" in which global security would be based on diplomacy and international commerce. After the cold war, however, the world was dangerous and unpredictable. U.S. military and political institutions had to scramble to deal with new and unexpected threats to American and global security.

In August 1990, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein challenged U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf region when his troops invaded Iraq's oil-rich neighbour, Kuwait. Believing that allowing such behavior to go unchecked only invited further aggression, Bush mobilized U.S. forces and demanded that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait. Bush also won approval for military actions from the United Nations Security Council and built a worldwide coalition of support, garnering cooperation and assistance from allies and former adversaries. In January 1991, when the U.S.-led alliance invaded the region in Operation Desert Storm, Iraqi resistance collapsed before the overwhelming military might. Kuwait was freed, but Hussein remained in power throughout the rest of the decade.

The end of the Persian Gulf War did not end hostilities around the world. Long-simmering ethnic and religious tensions in the Balkans, the African continent, and other areas around the world exploded into violence and genocide (systematic killing of an entire national or ethnic group). The Balkan peninsula, especially the former Yugoslavia, became an ethnic powder keg as national and religious identity provided the basis for violent confrontations. U.S. soldiers joined multinational peacekeeping forces to restore and maintain peace around the world.

America was not immune to the spreading violence. Several major terrorist attacks on American soil occurred during the decade, including the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. There were also attacks at the World Trade Center in New York City (1993), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) headquarters in Langley, Virginia (1993) and the Olympics in Atlanta (1996). These assaults shocked the public and caused law enforcement and government agencies nationwide to increase and update security measures.

The public's concern over ethics in government focused on President Bill Clinton even before his 1992 presidential election. Clinton's alleged involvement in the

Whitewater land development scheme, his public denials and subsequent admission of an affair with a young White House intern, and the highly political nature of his 1998 impeachment by the House of Representatives and his 1999 trial before the Senate, led Americans to question the personal and political ethics of both the executive branch and Congress.

Other trials during the decade further divided Americans, especially along racial lines. The trial of four white Los Angeles police officers in the beating of African American motorist Rodney King ended in a not-guilty verdict in April 1992, that sparked a vicious riot in south central Los Angeles. In 1995, in what many labeled the "trial of the century," former football star O. J. Simpson was found not guilty in the murders of his former wife and her male friend, Ronald Goldman.

Lifestyle and Social Trends:

The 1990s was a decade of extremes and contradictions. Americans built bigger and more elaborate homes and drove more expensive automobiles, then worked longer hours to pay for them. Americans spent more, borrowed more, and went more deeply into debt. They drank more coffee, smoked more cigars, and turned gambling into a national pastime. Children struggled to deal with the pressures of the adult world to which they were increasingly exposed, and many were forced to adjust to new step-families.

In a time of extremes and uncertainties, Americans sought out spiritual direction, not only returning to mainstream churches but also exploring an array of spiritual alternatives. New Age spiritualism waned and prospered during the 1990s. Although the numbers of Americans willing to identify themselves as New Age spiritualists declined, the popularity of such gurus as Deepak Chopra suggested that spiritualism continued to assert an influence behind the scenes in American life.

A high point for many in the decade—an event that was both political and spiritual—was the Million Man March. Organized by Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, the march drew almost one million African American men to the Mall in Washington, D.C., for a day filled with speeches and sermons extolling the virtues of family and community responsibility. The peaceful, uplifting event was the largest assembly of African Americans in U.S. history, until the Women's March on January 21, 2017, prompted by the election of Donald Trump.

The Aids Epidemic:

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the outbreak of HIV and AIDS swept across the United States and the rest of the world, though the disease originated decades earlier. The human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, is a virus that attacks the immune system, specifically CD4 cells (or T cells). The virus is transmitted through bodily fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal fluids, anal fluids, and breast milk. Historically, HIV has most often been spread through unprotected sex, the sharing of needles for drug use, and through birth.

Over time, HIV can destroy so many CD4 cells that the body can't fight infections and diseases, eventually leading to the most severe form of an HIV infection: acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS. A person with AIDS is very vulnerable to cancer and to life-threatening infections, such as pneumonia. Though there is no cure for HIV or AIDS, a person with HIV who receives treatment early can live nearly as long as someone without the virus.

In the 1960s, HIV spread from Africa to Haiti and the Caribbean when Haitian professionals in the colonial Democratic Republic of Congo returned home. The virus then moved from the Caribbean to New York City around 1970 and then to San Francisco later in the decade. International travel from the United States helped the virus spread across the rest of the globe. By the end of 1985, there were more than 20,000 reported cases of AIDS, with at least one case in every region of the world.

In 1990 the U.S. Congress enacted the Ryan White Care Act, providing funding for HIV community-based care and legislation to provide housing assistance to people living with AIDS. Ryan White was a young teenager who was a hemophiliac (blood could not coagulate) developed Aids through a contaminated blood treatment. After his diagnosis, his school refused to allow him to attend classes. He died five years later in April 1990.

Conflicting efforts were made to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States in the early 1990s. In 1993, President Clinton signed the U.S. HIV immigration exclusion policy into law. Unfortunately, this law banned people who were living with HIV from coming to the United States.

On a positive note, the International Olympic Committee ruled that HIV positive athletes were eligible to compete in the games in 1992. In 1995, the U.S. National Association of People with AIDS launched the first National HIV Testing Day. Finally, in 1996, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS was formed to advocate for global action on the epidemic.

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