

### **The History of the 1980s**

For many people in the United States, the late 1970s were a troubled and troubling time. The radical and countercultural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam War, uncertainty in the Middle East and economic crisis at home, had undermined Americans' confidence in their fellow citizens and in their government. By the end of Jimmy Carter's (1977 - 1981) presidency, the idealistic dreams of the 1960s were worn down by inflation, foreign policy turmoil and rising crime.

In response, many Americans embraced a new conservatism in social, economic and political life during the 1980s, characterized by the policies of President Ronald Reagan. Often remembered for its materialism and consumerism, the decade also saw the rise of the "yuppie," an explosion of blockbuster movies, and the emergence of cable networks like MTV, which introduced the music video and launched the careers of many iconic artists.

#### **The Rise of the New Right:**

The populist conservative movement known as the New Right enjoyed unprecedented growth in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It appealed to a diverse assortment of Americans, including evangelical Christians; anti-tax crusaders; advocates of deregulation and smaller markets; advocates of a more powerful American presence abroad; disaffected white liberals; and defenders of an unrestricted free market.

Historians link the rise of this New Right in part to the growth of the so-called Sunbelt, a mostly suburban and rural region of the Southeast, Southwest and California, where the population began to expand after World War II and exploded during the 1970s. They were tired of paying high taxes for social programs they did not consider effective and were worried about the stagnating economy. Many were also frustrated by what they saw as the federal government's constant, costly and inappropriate interference. The movement resonated with many citizens who had once supported more liberal policies, but who no longer believed the Democratic Party represented their interests. They became known as Reagan's Democrats.

Reagan's campaign cast a wide net, appealing to conservatives of all stripes with promises of big tax cuts and smaller government. He advocated for industrial deregulation, reductions in government spending and tax cuts for both individuals and corporations, as part of an economic plan he and his advisors referred to as "**supply-side economics**." Rewarding success and allowing people with money to keep more of it, the thinking went, would encourage them to buy more goods and invest in businesses. The resulting economic growth, they claimed, would "**trickle down**" to everyone.

Despite its mixed track record, a majority of Americans still believed in the conservative agenda by the late 1980s. When Ronald Reagan left office in 1989, he had the highest approval rating of any president since Franklin Roosevelt.

#### **Popular Culture:**

In some respects, the popular culture of the 1980s reflected the era's political conservatism. For many people, the symbol of the decade was the "**yuppie**": a baby boomer with a college education, a well-paying job and expensive taste. Many people derided yuppies for being self-centered and materialistic, and surveys of young urban professionals across the country showed that they were, indeed, more concerned with making money and buying consumer goods than their parents and grandparents had been.

At the movie theater, the 1980s was the age of the blockbuster. Movies like "**E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial**," "**Return of the Jedi**," "**Raiders of the Lost Ark**" and "**Beverly Hills Cop**" appealed to moviegoers of all ages and made hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office. The 1980s was also the heyday of the teen movie. Films like "**The Breakfast Club**," "**Some Kind of Wonderful**" and "**Pretty in Pink**" are still popular today.

At home, people watched family sitcoms like "**The Cosby Show**," "**Family Ties**," "**Roseanne**" and "**Married...with Children**." They also rented movies to watch on their new VCRs. By the end of the 1980s, 60 percent of American television owners got cable service and the most revolutionary cable network of all was MTV, which made its debut on August 1, 1981.

#### **The Civil Rights Movement Ignored:**

The struggles by Black Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, popularly referred to as the Civil Rights Movement, tore down Jim Crow segregation in law and in many cases in practice. With these victories, African American organizations and activists

focused on advancing economic opportunity to end inequality based on generations of discrimination. In the 1960s, President Johnson launched a "War on Poverty" which advanced social programs such as Job Corps and Head Start and provided overall more support for those in poverty. Both Democrats and Republicans supported and implemented affirmative action policies. And for a brief period, there was a recognized responsibility that federal intervention was necessary to advance racial equity in the country.

Though there was always some disagreement with federal intervention to advance racial equality, it would take until the election of Ronald Reagan for the federal government to deconstruct the programs, regulations and policies that had been in place specifically to advance equal opportunity.

Reagan was elected at a time when America was still reeling with self-doubt over its defeat in Vietnam. Though his optimistic campaign message promised better days ahead for the country, his positions on civil rights issues looked backward, not forward.

He opposed the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and also sought to limit the Voting Rights Act, claiming that these laws were an infringement on states' rights. He was also an outspoken critic of affirmative action, condemning racial quotas as a form of reverse racism even though his Republican predecessor, Richard Nixon, is often credited for affirmative action's institutionalization. While Ronald Reagan vehemently denied all charges of racism, his declarations for support of states' rights in Philadelphia, Mississippi (the place where three civil rights workers were murdered in the sixties) made it clear to many that President Reagan would work to turn back many civil rights gains.

President Reagan even tried to veto the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988, which stipulated that publicly funded institutions had to comply with civil rights laws in all areas of their organization. Despite his efforts, Congress had enough votes to pass the measure.

President Reagan did find success in cutting funding for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the civil rights division of the Justice Department — both organizations designed to crack down on discriminatory practices in education, housing, and the workplace. His cuts rendered both agencies toothless, causing the EEOC to file 60 percent fewer cases, and virtually ensuring that most cases of segregation in schools or housing at the Justice Department went uninvestigated.

Advocating for a return to the free enterprise "trickle down" economic principles that had been in favor before the Great Depression, Reagan enacted regressive policies

