

The Carter–Reagan–Bush Consensus

by Ron Perry

Chapter 21 in *Voices*, “The Carter–Reagan–Bush Consensus,” provides readers with a perspective that allows them to better understand present-day America. Historians often mistakenly dismiss the importance of the recent past as less than history, merely current events. Certainly the era from 1976 to 1992 is clearly connected to the current challenges facing the United States today. *Voices* provides students with a window through which to look back just far enough to recognize important trends in United States society and challenges them to act on them today.

The policies and priorities of Presidents Carter, Reagan, and George. H. W. Bush illustrate the growing gulf in power and wealth between the poor and the rich in the United States—a gulf that continues to widen today. Despite the end of the Cold War, the military-industrial complex continued to have a stranglehold on the federal budget and on foreign policy. Though new drugs greatly improved the quality of life for people with AIDS, the virus continued to ravage much of the world, as well as people who could not afford expensive medical care in the richer countries. Although the United States continued to dominate the world economy, its workers still struggled to earn a fair wage. By presenting these disturbing patterns in our society, *Voices* illustrates the need for ordinary citizens to speak out and take action to address the injustices and skewed governmental priorities in America.

Document-Based Questions

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

1. What new information did you learn about how the United States government spent tax dollars during the 1980s? Do you agree with Marian Edelman’s assertion that these policies are tantamount to “theft” from the nation’s poor?

2. What choices does Edelman present to her audience? Identify and explain the most compelling piece of evidence presented by Edelman.
3. Edelman challenges her audience by stating, “Democracy is not a spectator sport.” What actions can ordinary citizens take to address the inequities Edelman describes?

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ

1. How does César Chávez describe the life of the migrant farm worker? What evidence makes the most compelling case that Mexican Americans in the United States are second-class citizens?
2. How does Chávez define the United Farm Workers (UFW)? Describe his goals for farm workers. Why is the UFW a civil-rights organization as well as a trade union?
3. What two major trends does Chávez say “give us hope and encouragement”? From a twenty-first century perspective, do you believe his hopes were met? How and why?

TESTIMONY OF ISMAEL GUADALUPE ORTIZ

1. What does this passage teach us about the United States government’s actions in Puerto Rico?
2. According to Ortiz, what crimes has the United States committed in Vieques? Why did Ortiz choose to “fight” the United States Navy?
3. Do you think Ortiz’s actions were justified? Why, or why not?

LOCAL P-9 STRIKERS AND SUPPORTERS

1. How did working conditions change in the Hormel meat packing plants during the 1980s? What actions did workers take in response to these changes?
2. What risks did workers at Hormel assume when they took action to demand fair wages and safe working conditions? What risks did workers face if they didn’t advocate change? If you had been working at the Hormel plant, would you have stood with the strikers? Explain.

3. In the next passage in *Voices*, Douglas Fraser writes, “The Republican Party remains controlled by and the Democratic Party heavily influenced by business interest.” How does the Hormel strike support or undermine this view?

DOUGLAS A. FRASER

1. What reasons did Douglas Fraser give for resigning from the committee? What evidence does Fraser present to justify his position?
2. Fraser states “I am convinced there has been a shift on the part of business community toward confrontation, rather than cooperation.” Does the evidence presented by Fraser prove his point? Do you feel the account of workers at the Hormel plant prove Fraser’s point? Explain.
3. What is the “new flexing of business muscle” that Fraser discusses? Do you think he presents enough evidence to prove that it is a danger?

VITO RUSSO

1. How does this reading change your understanding of the fight against AIDS?
2. In “Why we Fight,” Vito Russo asserts that “I’m dying from homophobia. If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from racism.” In your opinion, what is the meaning of Russo’s statement?
3. How far has the struggle for AIDS in the United States come since Russo spoke these words in 1988?

ABBIE HOFFMAN

1. What evidence does Abbie Hoffman present to show that the CIA cannot be trusted? Which piece of evidence do you find most compelling?
2. What did Hoffman mean when he said that Thomas Paine was “talking about this spring day in this courtroom” when he wrote about the American Revolution?
3. How does Abbie Hoffman describe the attitude of people in the United States today? Do you agree with Hoffman’s analysis?

PUBLIC ENEMY

1. In your opinion, what message is Public Enemy conveying in their song “Fight the Power”? Who is their audience?
2. What evidence in “Fight the Power” can you find that the traditional approach to examining history fails to reach significant portions of United States society?
3. What statement does Public Enemy make about traditional United States heroes? Who might Public Enemy consider a true hero? Why?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 21,
“The Carter–Reagan–Bush Consensus”

After reading Chapter 21 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points.

1. The large corporations and the wealthiest individuals in the United States have encouraged belief in the American Dream as a way of preventing a critical mass of individuals from demanding fundamental change.
2. In terms of foreign policy, there is little discernible difference in the positions of the two major parties in the United States: both parties have placed military spending over the needs of the poor.
3. The needs of people who are not powerful are often entirely overlooked in our society, especially in times of economic downturn.
4. During the 1970s and 1980s, United States unions, facing aggressive efforts by big business to increase profits, lost ground in the fight for a fair wage.
5. While AIDS decimated significant portions of the gay population, the reaction of government and the media revealed an unwillingness to fully address the scale of the problem.

Main Point in *Voices*, Chapter 21, “The Carter–Reagan–Bush Consensus,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 21, “Carter–Reagan–Bush: The Bipartisan Consensus”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 21 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. By maintaining Cold War levels for military spending, the United States revealed that its foreign policy was based on a compulsion to maintain ideological, economic, and physical domination throughout the world.
7. During the Cold War, the United States continued to support dictators around the world, despite knowledge of their blatant institutional human-rights violations.
8. The energy policies of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated a shortsighted determination to expand the economy that flew in the face of scientific evidence.
9. “The Iran-contra affair was only one of the many instances in which the government of the United States violated its own laws in pursuit of some desired goal in foreign policy” (*People’s History*, p. 588).
10. The United States government carefully manipulated the media during the course of the Persian Gulf War in 1991 to prevent reports from impacting United States public opinion negatively, as it did during the Vietnam War.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 21, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. Marian Wright Edelman asks, “How do you want to spend scarce national resources?” Using passages from *Voices* answer Edelman’s question.
2. How do the passages from César Chávez and the workers from Hormel change your perception of the purpose of unions and the challenges they face?

3. What does the testimony of Ismael Ortiz reveal about the ways the United States military impacts the rest of world and its opinion of the United States? Does it reflect a legacy of imperialism? Explain.
4. What is a boycott? How have boycotts been used throughout United States history? How do you think the UFW boycott differed in substance and accomplishments from other historical boycotts?
5. What do you think is the “unfinished struggle of farm workers for justice” in the twenty-first century?
6. Do you think Puerto Ricans were justified in their resistance to the bombing at Vieques?
7. Why do you think it is so difficult to “forge ‘cooperation’ between workers and employers”? Under what circumstances do you think the task might be less difficult?
8. Do you think rap music is an appropriate agent of protest? Is it representative of many voices, or only of the voices of African American rappers?
9. What do the voices in this chapter have in common? How are they different? Which, if any, do you think were most and least effective in getting people to understand the features of the Carter–Reagan–Bush “consensus”?
10. What is homophobia? How does it influence the lives of gay people? How does it influence your educational and social environment?
11. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in “Main Points in *Voices*”?
12. Which of the voices in the chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

The general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 21 of both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

13. What does Reagan's treatment of the striking air-traffic controllers reveal about the United States government's attitude toward organized labor? What evidence from *Voices* reinforces your conclusion? What do you think about unions? Would you join a union?
14. In your opinion, what lessons does the Iran-contra affair teach us about the Reagan presidency? What evidence from the chapters supports your conclusions?
15. How has the tax structure in the United States changed since 1945? How does the changing tax structure illustrate the influence corporations and the rich in United States politics?
16. What is an epidemic? What is a pandemic? How did AIDS move from an epidemic to a pandemic?
17. Who were the Braceros and why were they brought to the United States?
18. How do the voices and stories of protest in Chapter 21 compare and contrast to the voices of protest and stories in Chapter 19? Are there any "surprises" in Chapter 21?
19. From your reading of these chapters, what do you think were the various strengths and weaknesses of the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations?
20. Was there any issue raised during the period in these chapters that you would be willing to fight for? How and why?
21. In these chapters, Howard Zinn discusses several "fundamentals of foreign policy" during the three presidencies. What were they?
22. What is OSHA? Did it protect workers during the terms of these three presidents? Does it protect United States workers today? Explain.
23. Was Reagan able to make good on his promise to balance the budget through tax cuts that would stimulate the economy and produce new revenue?
24. What other voices might have been added to Chapter 21 in *Voices* that might have provided a more complete understanding of Chapter 21 in *A People's History*?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. The selections from Chapter 21 in *Voices* point illustrate the importance of those individuals who had the courage to take a stand, to take action. Brainstorm a list of all the issues, problems, and conditions in your school, community, state, nation, and world that should be changed and challenged. Discuss the question, “Why have these problems not been solved?” Select one issue. In a formal letter addressed to the community or to someone who has the power to affect the situation, identify and explain the problem and suggest a solution.
2. In describing “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy, Howard Zinn writes that the song “offered an uncompromising message of protest.” What musical artists offer a voice of protest today? Using the search engine of your choice, examine and explain lyrics from a song critically commenting on today’s society.
3. Passages from *Voices* illustrate the struggles of the working-class to secure a living wage. Using the search engine of your choice, research the arguments for and against raising the minimum wage. In your opinion, what is a fair minimum wage? Justify your answer.
4. In “Why We Fight,” Vito Russo argues that America’s slow response to the AIDS virus provided clear evidence of the existence of two Americas. While AIDS had ravaged gay Americans, drug users, and the poor for years, the general alarm in America did not sound until the disease entered the ranks of the mainstream population. Using a search engine of your choice, research the impact AIDS has had on Africa. Analyze the United States government’s response to AIDS in Africa. How does the federal government’s response to the crisis in Africa mirror its early reaction to the AIDS impact on its own population?
5. Chapter 21 in *Voices* and *A People’s History* provide evidence of the influence

of big business on the Democrats and the Republicans. Using a search engine of your choice, research the platforms and policies of these two parties during the 2004 presidential election. What were the differences? Do you think America would benefit from another viable politician option, such as a labor party? Explain.

6. Learn more about the United States government's role in Puerto Rico. How and why did the United States gain control over Puerto Rico? Why do you think the United States continues in this role? How has the effort for Puerto Rican independence evolved over the years? What are the goals and actions of those who are fighting for independence? Do you think the United States should retain its current political control of Puerto Rico or change it? How and why?
7. Learn more about the International Conference on AIDS held in Malaysia during the summer of 2004. What were some of the key national and international statistics pertinent to the AIDS pandemic? How do they compare with statistics of the 1990s? What did the members of the conference propose should be done to fight the pandemic? Why do you think most Americans are not concerned about this rapidly growing disease?
8. Read Abbie Hoffman's book *Steal This Book* and/or view the movie *Steal This Movie*. What are the primary messages of the book and/or the movie? How does this source add to the understanding of Hoffman that you gained by reading his "Closing Argument"? Are Hoffman's messages relevant to the early twenty-first century? How and why?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. According to Public Enemy, "Elvis was a hero to most / but he never meant shit to me you see." In your opinion, what statement is being made in "Fight the Power"? Who are the true heroes in American society today?
2. What voices in Chapters 21 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
3. What actions did the UFW and workers at Hormel take to make their point for improved working conditions and wages? Which do you feel were most effective? How and why? Do you think unions are necessary in

contemporary United States society? What role should union's play in our future?

4. Howard Zinn states that the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations "clearly illustrated Hofstadter's thesis" that the men of power in American political parties have, in Hofstadter's words, "accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man" (*People's History*, p. 563). Using the voices and examples from the chapter(s), support or challenge the statement. How do the entries in *Voices* demonstrate that these qualities may not be the ones valued by many ordinary Americans?
5. What are the arguments against spending so much money on the United States military put forward in this/these chapter(s)? Do you agree or disagree with these arguments? How and why?
6. In "Carter-Reagan-Bush: The Bipartisan Consensus," Howard Zinn quotes a Republican analyst as saying, "It was the truly wealthy, more than anyone else, who flourished under Reagan . . . The 1980s were the triumph of upper America . . . the political ascendancy of the rich, and a glorification of capitalism, free markets, and finance" (*People's History*, p. 580). What is the most compelling evidence Zinn provides in both chapters to prove this point?
7. In *Voices*, Howard Zinn writes that the Local P-9 strike "was a classic example of how employer power is used to break unions and maintain their profits." How does this/these chapter(s) support this statement? How are strikes handled in contemporary society? Has the employer response changed? Do you think you might ever join in a strike? Explain.
8. Using examples in the reading, as well as knowledge you have of other historical eras, discuss why you think it was so difficult to "forge 'cooperation' between workers and employers" in the 1970s and 1980s. Is it any less difficult today? Explain. Under what circumstances do you think it might be less difficult?
9. In the final line of his address, Chávez writes, "And on that day, our nation shall fulfill its creed—and that fulfillment shall enrich us all." For Chávez, what was this creed? In the time since this statement was made, have farm workers experienced significant changes in their lives and working conditions in the United States? Explain.

10. Abbie Hoffman states, “I grew up with the idea that democracy is not something you believe in, or a place you hang your hat, but it’s something you do. You participate.” Do you agree or disagree with this view? Explain. What do you think are the weaknesses and strengths of United States democracy today?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Create a list of all the national resources that would be available to you as president of the United States. Then convene a meeting with your presidential advisers and begin a dialog about how you feel these should be spent. Once you reach some sort of consensus, ask members from the opposition party to join your discussion. How will the allocations change, based on this new dialog?
2. Design a stamp honoring a deserving individual or a group of unsung heroes who have yet to be honored. Keep in mind Public Enemy’s statement that “Most of my heroes don’t appear on no stamps.” What other figures from United States history have been honored by having their images placed on a stamp? Are most of these people the important figures in United States history, or are they ordinary folks like ourselves? Bring some of these images to class on the day that you share your new stamp and explain how and why your stamp is different from the others in origin and substance.
3. Develop a policy report for the president of the United States about the actions he should take to address the AIDS pandemic both in the United States and in the world.
4. Stage an AIDS awareness event. Be sure to clearly state the facts and make your goals clear.