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# The Modern State and the Age of Liberalism

## 1945–1980

Between 1945 and 1980, the United States became the world's leading economic and military power. That development defines these decades as a distinct period of American history. Internationally, a prolonged period of tension and conflict known as the Cold War drew the United States into an engagement in world affairs unprecedented in the nation's history. Domestically, three decades of sustained economic growth, whose benefits were widely, though imperfectly, distributed, expanded the middle class and brought into being a mass consumer society. These international and domestic developments were intertwined with the predominance of liberalism in American politics and public policy. One might think of an "age of liberalism" in this era, encompassing the social-welfare liberalism that was a legacy of the New Deal and the rights liberalism of the 1960s, both of which fell under the larger umbrella of Cold War liberalism.

Global leadership abroad and economic prosperity at home were conditioned on further expansions in government power. How that power was used proved controversial. Immediately following World War II, a national security state emerged to investigate so-called subversives in the United States and, through the clandestine Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to destabilize foreign governments abroad. Meanwhile, American troops went to war in Korea and Vietnam. At home, African Americans, women, the poor, and other social groups called for greater equality in American life and sought new laws and government initiatives to make that equality a reality. Here, in brief, are the three key dimensions of this convulsive, turbulent era.



## Global Leadership and the Cold War

When the United States officially joined the combatants of World War II, it entered into an alliance with the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. That alliance proved impossible to sustain after 1945, as the United States and the Soviet Union became competitors to shape postwar Europe, East Asia, and the developing world. The resulting Cold War lasted four decades, during which the United States extended its political and military reach onto every continent. Under the presidency of Harry S. Truman, American officials developed the policy of containment—a combination of economic, diplomatic, and military actions to limit the expansion of communism—that subsequent presidents embraced and expanded.

Diplomatic and military intervention abroad was a hallmark of the Cold War. Most American interventions took place in developing countries, in recently independent, decolonized nations, and in countries where nationalist movements pressed for independence. In the name of preventing the spread of communism, the United States intervened directly or indirectly in China, Iran, Guatemala, Cuba, Indonesia, and the Dominican Republic, among many other nations, and fought major wars in Korea and Vietnam. This new global role for the United States inspired support but also spurred detractors. The latter eventually included the antiwar movement during the war in Vietnam. Chapter 25 focuses on the Cold War, and Vietnam is addressed in Chapter 28.



## The Age of Liberalism

In response to the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal expanded federal responsibility for the social welfare of ordinary citizens, sweeping away much of the *laissez-faire* individualism of earlier eras (see Chapter 23). Legislators from both parties embraced liberal ideas about the role of government and undertook such measures as the GI Bill, subsidies for suburban home ownership, and investment in infrastructure and education. Poverty, however, affected nearly one-third of Americans in the 1960s, and racial discrimination denied millions of nonwhites full citizenship. Lack of opportunity became a driving force in the civil rights movement and in the Great Society under President Lyndon Johnson.

Inspired by African American civil rights, other social movements sought equality based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other identities. If "New Deal liberalism" had focused on social welfare, this "rights liberalism" focused on protecting people from discrimination and ensuring equal citizenship. These struggles resulted in new laws, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and transformative Supreme Court decisions. Conservative opponents, however, mobilized in the 1960s against what they saw as the excesses of liberal activism. The resulting conflict began to reshape politics in the 1970s and laid the groundwork for a new conservative resurgence. These developments are discussed in Chapters 27 and 28.



## Mass Consumption and the Middle Class

More than ever, the postwar American economy was driven by mass consumption and the accompanying process of suburbanization. Rising wages, increasing access to higher education, and the availability of suburban home ownership raised living standards and allowed more Americans than ever to afford consumer goods. Suburbanization transformed the nation's cities, and the Sunbelt led the nation in population growth. But the new prosperity had mixed results. Cities declined and new racial and ethnic ghettos formed. Suburbanization and mass consumption raised concerns that the nation's rivers, streams, air, and open land were being damaged, and an environmental movement arose in response. And prosperity itself proved short-lived. By the 1970s, deindustrialization had eroded much of the nation's once prosperous industrial base.

A defining characteristic of the postwar decades was the growth of the American middle class. That growth was predicated on numerous demographic changes. Home ownership increased, as did college enrollments. Women worked more outside the home and spurred a new feminism. Children enjoyed more purchasing power, and a "teen culture" arose on television, in popular music, and in film. The family became politicized, too, and by the late 1970s, liberals and conservatives were divided over how best to address the nation's family life. All these developments are discussed in Chapters 25 and 29.

# The Modern State and the Age of Liberalism 1945–1980

## Thematic Understanding

This timeline arranges some of the important events of this period into themes. Consider the entries under "America in the World" and "Politics and Power" across all four decades.

What connections were there between international developments and domestic politics in this era of the Cold War? >

	AMERICA IN THE WORLD	POLITICS & POWER	AMERICAN & NATIONAL IDENTITY	GEOGRAPHY & THE ENVIRONMENT	WORK, EXCHANGE, & TECHNOLOGY
1940	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Truman Doctrine</li> <li>• Israel created (1947)</li> <li>• Marshall Plan (1948)</li> <li>• Containment strategy emerges</li> <li>• NATO created; West Germany created (1949)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GI Bill (1944)</li> <li>• Loyalty-Security Program</li> <li>• Taft-Hartley Act (1947)</li> <li>• Truman reelected (1948)</li> <li>• Truman's Fair Deal (1949)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>To Secure These Rights</i> (1947)</li> <li>• Desegregation of armed services (1948)</li> <li>• <i>Shelley v. Kraemer</i> (1948)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued South-North migration of African Americans</li> <li>• First Levittown opens (1947)</li> <li>• FHA and VA subsidize suburbanization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bretton Woods system established: World Bank, International Monetary Fund</li> <li>• Baby boom establishes new consumer generation</li> </ul>
1950	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permanent mobilization as a result of NSC-68</li> <li>• Korean War (1950–1953)</li> <li>• Geneva Accords regarding Vietnam (1954)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cold War liberalism</li> <li>• McCarthyism and Red Scare</li> <li>• Eisenhower's presidency (1953–1961)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> (1954)</li> <li>• Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955)</li> <li>• Little Rock—Central High School desegregation battle</li> <li>• Southern Christian Leadership Conference founded (1957)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disneyland opens (1955)</li> <li>• National Highway Act (1956)</li> <li>• Growth of suburbia and Sunbelt</li> <li>• Atomic bomb testing in Nevada and Pacific Ocean</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treaty of Detroit (1950)</li> <li>• Military-industrial complex begins to rise</li> <li>• National Defense Education Act (1958) spurs development of technology</li> </ul>
1960	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cuban missile crisis (1962)</li> <li>• Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964)</li> <li>• Johnson sends ground troops to Vietnam; war escalates (1965)</li> <li>• Tet offensive (1968); peace talks begin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John F. Kennedy's New Frontier</li> <li>• John F. Kennedy assassinated (1963)</li> <li>• Lyndon B. Johnson's landslide victory (1964)</li> <li>• War on Poverty; Great Society</li> <li>• Riots at Democratic National Convention (1968)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greensboro sit-ins</li> <li>• <i>The Feminine Mystique</i> (1963)</li> <li>• Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts (1964–1965)</li> <li>• National Organization for Women founded (1966)</li> <li>• Alcatraz occupation (1969)</li> <li>• Black Power</li> <li>• Student and antiwar activism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great Society environmental initiatives</li> <li>• Urban riots (1964–1968)</li> <li>• Kerner Commission Report (1968)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic boom</li> <li>• Government spending on Vietnam and Great Society</li> <li>• Medicare and Medicaid created (1965)</li> </ul>
1970	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nixon invades Cambodia (1971)</li> <li>• Paris Accords end Vietnam War (1973)</li> <li>• Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel (1978)</li> <li>• Iranian Revolution (1979) and hostage crisis (1979–1981)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richard Nixon's landslide victory (1972)</li> <li>• Watergate scandal; Nixon resigns (1974)</li> <li>• Jimmy Carter elected president (1976)</li> <li>• Moral Majority founded (1979)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equal Rights Amendment (1972)</li> <li>• <i>Roe v. Wade</i> (1973)</li> <li>• <i>Bakke v. University of California</i> (1978)</li> <li>• Harvey Milk assassinated (1978)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First Earth Day (1970)</li> <li>• Environmental Protection Agency established (1970)</li> <li>• Endangered Species Act (1973)</li> <li>• Three Mile Island accident (1979)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy crisis (1973)</li> <li>• Inflation surges, while economy stagnates (stagflation)</li> <li>• Deindustrialization</li> <li>• Tax revolt in California (1978)</li> </ul>