

5 The extent to which the presidency and US politics were revitalised, 1981-96

► To what extent did Reagan revitalise the presidency and politics?

The situation in 1980

In the 1970s, many commentators discussed whether the United States was becoming ungovernable. Polls showed public confidence in political leaders at an all-time low and some contemporaries believed the presidency had become an unworkable institution. Gerald Ford said that there was an 'imperilled presidency' rather than an 'imperial presidency'.

Effective presidential leadership was difficult. The Founding Fathers designed a governmental system to protect citizens from powerful monarchical government through checks and balances on the power of the President, especially through Congress. In the 1970s, congressional fear of the 'imperial presidency' made Congress particularly difficult to handle (see page 165). Carter's presidency demonstrated that even a President whose party controlled both the House of Representatives and the Senate was not assured of legislative success (see page 167). Reagan's four immediate predecessors left office perceived as failures. Johnson's Vietnam War, Nixon's Watergate scandal and the perceived incompetence of Ford and Carter had undermined Americans' faith in their President and decreased his power in relation to Congress.

A revitalised presidency?

Despite the situation in 1980 and the constraints, Reagan had the potential to exercise presidential power effectively. First, he had taken office during a period of crisis and Americans were usually willing to follow their President at such times. Second, his poll ratings were high after the assassination attempt in 1981, so Congress felt duty-bound to go along with his wishes. Third, in 1976, Harvard professor Richard Neustadt had described presidential power as 'the power to persuade and the power to bargain', and the 'great communicator' was both persuasive and willing to bargain. He was also pleasant and obliging with individual members of Congress. They valued invitations from a congenial President to White House events: it provided good photos for the voters back home. Tip O'Neill said, 'Men and women in Congress love nothing better than to hear from the head guy. So they can go back to their districts and say, "I was talking to the President the other day".'

Many believe that Reagan revitalised the presidency and demonstrated that it was not weak or ineffective but could be vigorous when the White House was

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inhabited by one with good leadership qualities. They consider his revitalisation of the presidency one of his greatest achievements, emphasising how he got the budget he wanted in 1981 and how popular he was. People admired the way he was so often 'presidential', for example, in his bearing and rhetoric during the 1984 ceremonies commemorating the Normandy landings. On the other hand, polls showed that confidence in the Reagan presidency was badly damaged by the Iran–Contra scandal (see below) and the presidency did not seem revitalised under his successor, George Bush.

Iran–Contra

In November 1986, it was rumoured then admitted that the Reagan administration had covertly shipped arms to Iran in an attempt ('almost too absurd to comment on' according to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger) to get hostages held by pro-Iranian forces in Lebanon released. Defensive and ill at ease on TV for once, Reagan also had to confess that profits from the arms sales had been diverted to **Contra rebels** in Nicaragua without consultation with Congress.

Many Americans were shocked. Not only did they consider Iran a great enemy (see page 168) but the law said the President could not make major weapons sales or intervene in Central America without congressional knowledge and assent. The **Iran–Contra** affair was considered highly significant. It triggered uproar in Congress, large-scale and hostile investigative journalism in the media, and a dramatic fall in Reagan's approval ratings from 64 to 44 per cent. Multiple investigations into Iran–Contra criticised Reagan's foreign policy. In 1987, the **Tower Commission** recorded that by violating the US embargo on arms sales to Iran, the Reagan administration raised questions as to whether US policy statements could be relied upon and rewarded a regime that clearly supported terrorism and hostage taking. The Tower Commission criticised Reagan's delegatory management style as totally inadequate, noting that he ignored experienced foreign policy professionals in the State Department and tended to give the most general guidance and to leave the details of implementation to his staff. Although the Tower Commission concluded that Reagan probably did not have prior knowledge of the diversion of funds for Contra aid, it emerged during Senate hearings in summer 1987 and Colonel Oliver North's trial in early 1989 that Reagan knew of and probably authorised the diversion of funds. Had this been known at the time of the Tower Commission, Reagan might have faced impeachment.

Historians debate why Reagan committed illegal actions contrary to the advice of his Secretaries of Defense and State and his own declared foreign policy, and then lied about it. One suggestion is that his governmental style was to blame. If one believes (and not everyone does) that the 76-year-old President was not ultimately in control, one could perhaps blame his inattentiveness on any one or all of the following factors:



KEY TERMS

Contra rebels Opponents of the left-wing Sandinista Nicaraguan government.

Iran–Contra The 1986 scandal in which the Reagan administration covertly sold arms to Iran and diverted funds from the sale to help Contra rebels who opposed the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Tower Commission Reagan appointed a commission headed by Texas Republican Senator John Tower to investigate Iran–Contra. The report was published in February 1987.

KEY FIGURE

David Stockman (1946–)

In the Reagan administration, he was Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) from 1981–5. His book *The Triumph of Politics: Why the Reagan Revolution Failed* was an influential account by a disillusioned conservative. The book depicted Reagan as a pragmatist and more of a consensus politician than is commonly thought.

An 'amiable dunce'?

When he became President, Reagan was nearly 70. Doubts about his intelligence were widespread. President Johnson's Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford was one of many who concluded that Reagan was simply an 'amiable dunce'.

Reagan frequently came across as confused. For example, he was a great storyteller and several times told the story of a heroic Second World War pilot as if it were true – but it was from a movie. He told of how he had seen Nazi concentration camps at the end of the Second World War, but he had never left the United States during that time. At a 1982 state dinner in Brazil, Reagan toasted the President of Brazil and the 'people of Bolivia'. Some Congressmen, including Republicans, worried about him. Robert Michel, leader of the House Republicans, said, 'Sometimes I think, my gosh, he ought to be better posted. Where are his briefing papers?' Liberals were frequently scathing. In spring 1984, Reagan and the Pope met in Alaska. T-shirts were sold with 'Great Minds Meet In The Great Land' on them, but a few wits wore T-shirts adorned with 'The Pope Meets The Dope'. Unsympathetic biographer Edmund Morris described him as an 'apparent airhead' and respected journalist Lou Cannon focused on Reagan's reliance on 'scripts'. For example, Reagan frequently read from notes when talking to Tip O'Neill. When asked to help Reagan prepare for the televised presidential debates in 1980, **David Stockman** was 'shocked' by Reagan's 'woolly platitudes ... his lack of agility was disquieting'. In his 1985 memoirs, Stockman called Reagan an economic illiterate, whose enthusiasm for supply-side theory (see page 201) derived from his having to pay 91 per cent tax while working in Hollywood. Stockman's view of Reagan's limited intellect was highly influential. Many accused Reagan of excessive delegation and indecision. Stockman said Reagan 'gave no orders, no commands; asked for no information; expressed no urgency', while Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan said:

From first day to last at Treasury, I was flying by the seat of my pants. The President never told me what he believed or what he wanted to accomplish in the field of economics. I had to figure these things out like any other American, by studying his speeches and reading newspapers.

On the other hand, Regan and economist Martin Anderson both worked closely with Reagan and said the President understood basic economic theories and made crucial economic policy decisions himself. Many sources suggest Reagan was more in control than is commonly thought. Reagan himself said that he believed in delegation, so long as what was being implemented was what he wanted. Martin Anderson said:

He just sat back ... and waited until important things were brought to him. And then he would act, quickly, decisively, usually, very wisely ... He knew what he wanted to do and we knew what he wanted done. For five years before he was elected President he staked out clear positions on hundreds of policy issues, and on major issues he spelled out his proposals in some detail.

Even liberal Arthur Schlesinger Jr admitted:

If the President can point the country and persuade the voters that it is the right direction in which to go, and if he can find reasonably competent subordinates to figure out the details, it does not matter so much politically that he himself hardly knows what is going on.

What then might account for the belief that Reagan was an 'amiable dunce'?

- Former close associates might have wanted to prove that they were the brains behind the Reagan presidency, or might have felt betrayed in some way. For example, Stockman was probably disillusioned by Reagan's pragmatism.
- Perhaps Reagan only concentrated when fully engaged. He seemed to have a low boredom threshold. It was rumoured that he frequently nodded off at Cabinet meetings, although that might have been due to his age and increased difficulty hearing. Some work clearly bored him. When Chief of Staff **James Baker** asked him in 1983 why he had not read the (short) briefing file for the world economic summit that day, Reagan replied that he had been watching *The Sound of Music* the night before.
- Possibly his poor eyesight made him fail to recognise his own son at his graduation ceremony and his sole black Cabinet officer at another public occasion, and/or perhaps there were problems with the onset of Alzheimer's disease.
- While Reagan might have lacked the academic intelligence more usual in a President, he had different kinds of intelligence, such as interpersonal intelligence (he handled people well) and 'language intelligence' (he could speak well). Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger directed the Pentagon to produce graphics and cartoons to make their pitch to the President. Reagan's national security adviser in 1986 soon realised that the best way to overcome Reagan's ignorance of the rest of the world was through Defense Department films. Reagan clearly needed to visualise things.

- his hearing difficulties
- his tendency to forget what he had been told and had done
- the early stages of his Alzheimer's.

Members of the Tower Committee were shocked and amazed by Reagan when he testified before them. A Republican member said it was a 'waste of time' talking to him because 'with Ronald Reagan, no one is there. The sad fact is we don't have a President.' Other suggestions include that Reagan always stubbornly refused to believe he had been wrong, or that he was motivated by security concerns and/or sympathy for the hostages.

Whatever the reasons for his actions, Reagan failed to make any progress with either the Iranians or the Nicaraguans. His ratings plummeted temporarily and he might have ended his presidency in disgrace had it not been for a booming economy and for the ending of the Cold War. As it was, he left the presidency with the highest popularity rating of any outgoing President since polls began, which suggested that he had indeed revitalised the presidency – for the moment at least.

Ending the Cold War

At the same time as the Iran–Contra scandal unfolded, Reagan had a foreign policy triumph. In his first term, he was a militant Cold Warrior who referred to



KEY FIGURE

James Baker (1930–)

White House Chief of Staff (1981–5) and Secretary of the Treasury (1985–8) in the Reagan administration. He is generally considered to have been highly effective during Reagan's first term.

The Teflon President

Critics of Reagan, disappointed that he seemed to have got away with 'Irangate', dubbed him the '**Teflon President**' because no dirt seemed to stick to him.



KEY TERM

Teflon President When policies went wrong, many Americans believed Reagan was not too closely involved; the blame never stuck to him. (Teflon is a non-stick material used in saucepans and so on.)

**KEY FIGURE****Mikhail Gorbachev
(1931–)**

Leader of the Soviet Union from 1985–91. He introduced liberalisation within the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe. His concerns about the Soviet economy and recognition of international interdependency led him to collaborate with President Reagan in ending the Cold War.

**Reagan on his
administration**

'We meant to change a nation, and instead we changed the world.'

the Soviet Union as the 'Evil Empire'. However, in his second term he and Soviet leader **Mikhail Gorbachev** brought the Cold War to an end. Many Americans give Reagan most of the credit, believing that his massive defence expenditure forced the Soviets to bankrupt themselves trying to keep up and helped convince them to negotiate with Reagan. In contrast, some historians emphasise that Gorbachev's decision to retreat from the arms race and empire in order to revitalise the Soviet economy left America with little to worry about and that Gorbachev's retreat was probably the main factor in the end of the Cold War. However, Reagan deserves credit for agreeing with Gorbachev that the nuclear arms race should be ended and for establishing a good working relationship with him.

The revitalisation of US politics

Many believe that Reagan helped restore confidence in the American political system as a whole. He certainly contributed to a Republican Party revival in the 1980s, but the Democrats retained control of the House of Representatives throughout his presidency, reasserted their domination in the Senate in 1986, and continued to hold a majority of state governorships and two thirds of state legislative chambers. Thus Reagan's electoral success was personal rather than party based. His coattails failed to carry significant numbers of Republican candidates into office. Even when he campaigned extensively on behalf of fellow Republicans, as in the mid-term elections of 1986, it had little effect: members of Congress got elected by pleasing and serving their constituents, not because their constituents liked the President. On the other hand, Vice President George Bush's election to the White House in 1988 owed much to the continued popularity of Reagan. Polls showed that 80 per cent of voters who approved of Reagan supported Bush.

Reagan helped restore the confidence and prestige of the Republican Party, but perhaps more importantly, his ability to collaborate with the Democrat Congress and his own popularity convinced many Americans that the American system worked after all. He probably had revitalised American politics – for the moment. Perhaps even more important, he had helped revitalise American national self-confidence.

Summary diagram: The extent to which the presidency and US politics were revitalised, 1981–96

Revitalised	Not revitalised
Dignified bearing, impressive and inspirational rhetoric	Did not seem revitalised under his successors
Ended the Cold War	Iran–Contra
Politics less partisan during his presidency	Politics bitterly partisan in the 1990s

6 After Reagan – 1989–96

► How did Reagan impact upon the presidencies of Bush and Clinton?

It is generally considered that Reagan had a considerable impact on the presidencies of Presidents George H.W. Bush (1989–93) and Bill Clinton (1993–2001).

The economy after Reagan

Overall, Reagan bequeathed significant economic problems to his successor, Vice President George H.W. Bush. Bush's inaugural speech indicated that there would be changes from the Reagan years, and a furious Nancy Reagan so glowered at him that someone sitting near felt obliged to nudge her. First, Bush promised to decrease the \$2.7 trillion deficit upon which \$200 billion interest was paid annually. He failed. The deficit rose to \$4 trillion by 1993. Second, he promised 'no new taxes'. However, the deficit was such that in November 1990 he agreed with Congress that taxes had to rise.

KEY TERM

Voodoo economics When George H.W. Bush gave this description to Reagan's economic policies, he meant that they would need some kind of magic to work effectively.

George Herbert Walker Bush

1924 Born to a wealthy family in Connecticut

1942–4 Wartime naval service

1945–8 Yale University

1948–64 Successful businessman in Texas

1966 Elected to the Texas House of Representatives

1971–2 US ambassador to UN under President Nixon

1973 Chairman of Republican National Committee

1974–9 US ambassador to China

1976–7 Reluctantly headed the CIA, believing it would finish his political career but that 'one should serve his country and his President'

1980 Unsuccessful bid for Republican nomination; criticised Reagan's economic plans as '**voodoo economics**'; defeated by Reagan

1981–9 Reagan's loyal, discreet Vice President

1988 Elected President

1990 Clean Air Act

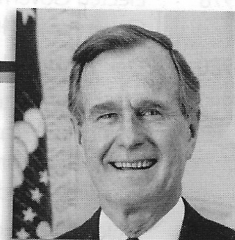
1990–1 Victorious in Gulf War

1990–2 Economic recession

1992 Race riots in Los Angeles

Defeated by Democrat Bill Clinton in presidential election

Bush was something of a caretaker President, elected primarily on the strength of his connection with the popular outgoing President Reagan. Reasonably successful in foreign policy (notably the Gulf War), he made little impact on domestic issues. That cost him re-election in a period of recession.



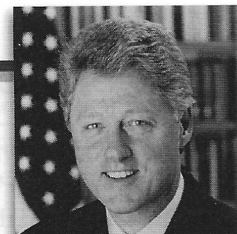
William Jefferson

'Bill' Clinton

- 1946 Born to a lower middle-class family in Hope, Arkansas
- 1968 Graduated from Georgetown University
- 1970 Rhodes scholar in Oxford
- 1972 Directed George McGovern's presidential campaign in Texas
- 1973 Graduated from Yale Law School; joined law faculty at University of Arkansas
- 1974 Unsuccessfully ran for the House of Representatives
- 1976 Directed presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter in Arkansas; elected Attorney General of Arkansas
- 1978 Elected Governor of Arkansas (youngest US Governor for 40 years)
- 1980 Defeated in gubernatorial election
- 1982 Thrice re-elected as Governor by substantial majorities; greatly improved education and the economy (favourable tax policies encouraged industrial growth)
- 1992 Defeated President Bush in presidential election

1993

Narrow congressional approval for legislation to reduce federal government budget deficit by increased taxes on wealthy and modest cuts in government programmes; obtained congressional approval of **NAFTA**



1994

Clinton health care plan died in Congress; Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1954, so Clinton accommodated some of the Republican agenda

1996

Re-elected, defeating Republican Bob Dole

1998

Monica Lewinsky sex scandal

1999

Republican Congress tried to impeach him

2000

Clinton's Vice President Al Gore defeated by George W. Bush in presidential election

Liberals admired Clinton because his presidency helped ensure the continuation of the welfare state, which was greatly threatened by right-wing Republicans. He also helped restore the economy, particularly by turning the federal budget deficit into a huge surplus. Partisan Republicans tried to ruin his presidency by exploitation of his sexual escapades, but although distracted, he remained popular with the American public.

KEY TERMS

NAFTA The North American Free Trade Agreement provided for the gradual elimination of tariffs and other trade barriers between the USA, Canada and Mexico.

New Democrats A group of moderate Democrats who emerged in the late 1980s. They believed that the extreme liberalism of Old Democrats was making the Democratic Party unelectable.

Bush's defeat by the Democrat Bill Clinton in the presidential election of 1992 was mostly the result of the recession that began in 1990 and owed much to Reagan's legacy – the massive federal deficit, the expensive savings and loan bailout, the trade imbalance and the lack of any policy to help revitalise American industry.

Clinton was a leading **New Democrat**. These were moderate Democrats convinced that the increasingly leftward trajectory of the Democratic Party was making it unelectable. One of the New Democrat emphases was upon fiscal conservatism, a legacy of Reagan's campaign against federal government expenditure on certain social programmes and Reagan's extravagant defence spending, the prime cause of the federal government's rocketing deficit.

After a shaky start, President Clinton learned to manage Congress so that he achieved a balanced budget (he cut defence spending and raised taxes on big earners and corporations) while keeping the social programmes he really wanted. By 1996, the economy was booming. That helped ensure his re-election.

The Reagan effect continued until 1996. His massive federal deficit and antipathy toward large-scale government spending on certain social programmes had led to the election of a fiscally conservative New Democrat whose attitude to big government and social change had been affected by the Reagan years.

Big government after Reagan

Bush had promised 'to make kinder the face of the nation' but he also opposed 'big government'. This led to inconsistencies. He encouraged the states to improve education, but did not want to spend federal monies on it. He strongly supported the Disability Act to protect disabled workers but vetoed other bills helpful to workers, including one to give workers up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to handle family emergencies and one that he said would give the unemployed excessive benefits.

Even the Democratic Party had to accept that, as Clinton said, the era of big government was over. Clinton demonstrated the Reagan effect when he said he wanted to 'end welfare as we know it' so that it would 'cease to be a way of life'. In a 1993 speech before a group of black ministers in Memphis, Tennessee, Clinton focused on ghetto problems, including the number of African-Americans on welfare. Clinton said if Martin Luther King were still alive, he would say:

I've fought for freedom, but not for the freedom of [black] people to kill each other with reckless abandon, not for the freedom of [black] children to have children, and the [black] fathers of the children to walk away and abandon them as if they don't amount to anything ... That is not what I lived and died for.

Most voters resented welfare costs but welfare reform was a difficult issue for Democrats because their party traditionally aided the poor. A proposed welfare reform bill ended AFDC, which had given cash aid to low-income families (mostly headed by single mothers). The bill required able-bodied welfare recipients to work after two years and terminated all welfare payments after five years. When a Department of Health and Human Services' official predicted that one million children might be without food or shelter if the bill were passed, most of the President's staff and his wife opposed the bill.

The Welfare Reform Act

The final version of the bill, as passed by the Republican-dominated Congress, had what journalist Joe Klein described as 'gratuitously brutal provisions'. It denied benefits to immigrants who were not yet citizens, limited eligibility for Medicaid and food stamps for those who did not find work, and eliminated the lifetime guarantee of government support for poor mothers. Clinton felt that as he had promised to 'end welfare as we know it' he dared not veto the bill for a third time, lest it cost him the next election. This infuriated Old Democrats.

William Jefferson

'Bill' Clinton

1946 Born to a lower
middle-class family in
Arkansas1968 Graduated from
Georgetown University1970 Rhodes scholar to
Oxford1972 Directed George
H.W. Bush's vice-presidential
campaign in Texas1973 Graduated from
Yale Law School
Faculty at University of
Arkansas1974 Unsuccessfully re-elected
Arkansas Representative1976 Directed presidential
campaign in Arkansas
and the economy
and the economy1978 Elected Governor
Governor for 4 years1980 Defeated in gubernatorial
election1982 Thrice re-elected
Arkansas Governor1984 and the economy
and the economy1987 Defeated in gubernatorial
election

However, there were those who felt the welfare reform worked well. First, welfare rolls were halved, although the booming economy helped there. Clinton made work pay. In 1986, a single mother who left welfare for work could expect to make about \$1900 more than she was getting from the government and lose her health benefits. In 1999, she earned \$7000 more and kept her health benefits. People responded to the incentives. The workforce participation rate amongst the poorest women rose from 35 to 55 per cent within three years. Second, Clinton removed the disincentive to marriage that had been an unintended consequence of the old welfare system, which had only given benefits to single mothers. The number of children living with single parents dropped by 8 per cent within five years of the bill's passage, while the percentage of black children raised by married parents rose from 34.8 to 38.9 per cent.

The Welfare Reform Act was an excellent example of Reagan's impact upon the Old Democrat big government philosophy, so this was probably the wrong time for Clinton's able (but unelected) wife Hillary to produce a plan for universal health care coverage. Republicans were not consulted and as many Republicans had good health insurance they were not keen to pay for others to have it. Congress therefore rejected the plan.

A revitalisation of the presidency and politics after Reagan?

George H.W. Bush lacked charisma and seemed unable to cope with many domestic problems. Bill Clinton had the charisma and great political ability, but was dogged by sex scandals. As a result, neither could be said to have demonstrated a revitalised presidency, although Clinton soon developed considerable skill in getting what he wanted from Congress. However, whereas Republican Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan had been treated with considerable respect by the Democrats, Republican Senator Bob Dole said the Republicans had 'a pretty hard-right group in the party who were just never going to accept' Clinton.

If increased partisanship represented revitalisation, then politics certainly was revitalised. Journalist Joe Klein said Clinton's presidency marked 'an unprecedented escalation in the levels of partisan enmity and journalistic fecklessness in Washington ... American politics had turned rancid'. Klein blamed the dramatically increased partisanship on extremists in both parties and on their encouragement by a voracious press keen on scandals. Klein cited Republican **Newt Gingrich** as a good example of the fiercely partisan politics that does not suggest any positive revitalisation of politics. Gingrich's friend Vin Weber, confessed:

I don't think you can underestimate the generational aspect of this situation. Our generation came in and we had absolutely no respect for any of the traditions – not the speakership, not the presidency, not bipartisanship. We thought the parliamentary language was stuffy and silly. We thought hypocrisy was the only



KEY FIGURE

Newt Gingrich (1943–)

Conservative Republican congressman from Georgia, Speaker of the US House of Representatives 1995–9. Important in the Republican gains in the 1994 congressional elections and the increased political partisanship of the 1990s.

sin. [House Minority Leader] Bob Michel's generation – they wanted to make life less political for the returning [Second World War] veterans. We wanted to politicize everything.

Another Gingrich ally talked of Gingrich waging war on the Democrats:

The Democrats were arrogant to the point of corruption, and Newt's idea was to expose the arrogance and corruption for what it was. It was a guerrilla war, and I don't think we could have won the House in 1994 without those sort of tactics. But the victory came at a price, and the price was a loss of civility.

The Contract with America

In 1994, Gingrich's *The Contract with America* helped the Republicans capture the Senate for the first time since 1980 and the House for the first time since 1984. According to Gingrich, *The Contract with America* 'stood on Reagan's shoulders' when it called for:

- Tax cuts for the middle class.
- Reductions in the federal bureaucracy.
- The elimination of 'non-essential' social programmes.
- 'Effective death penalty provisions'.
- An emphasis upon American family values.
- 'Reasonable limits on punitive damages' and reform of product-liability laws 'to stem the endless tide of litigation'.
- A constitutional amendment requiring the federal government to present a balanced budget each year.
- Increased defence expenditure to strengthen national defence.

However, Gingrich soon fell from favour due to his arrogance, his dominant role in the Clinton impeachment despite having had an affair with a young intern himself, and Clinton's move to the centre and co-option of some Republican programmes such as a tough-on-crime bill. The partisanship scandals in Washington were unedifying and surely did not constitute any worthwhile revitalisation. If Reagan had revitalised politics, it was not to be for long.

Social change after Reagan

During the 1980s, the phrase 'culture wars' was commonly used to describe the differing views liberals and social conservatives held about American society. During the 1992 Republican National Convention, presidential candidate Pat Buchanan said, 'There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. This war is for the soul of America.' The presidencies of Bush and Clinton saw the culture wars reflected and continued in clashes over abortion, homosexuality, gender, race and permissiveness.

Abortion

The advent of the pill in the 1960s and the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v Wade* ruling suggested a revolutionary change in reproductive rights. However, the extent of conservative opposition was great and the tenuous nature of the advances in women's reproductive rights remained clear in the Bush and Clinton years.

Bush had been pro-choice earlier in his career but like many moderate Republicans thought it politically wise to change his stance. In his 1988 election campaign he declared that 'abortion is murder' (his wife Barbara disagreed). The Religious Right were always unsure of Bush's conservative credentials. He dashed their hopes that he would nominate a known pro-lifer to the Supreme Court when he nominated David Souter, whose views on abortion were unknown. The composition of the Supreme Court was crucial for decisions about ease of access to abortion and a series of Supreme Court rulings pleased the anti-abortion lobby: *Bowen v Kendrick* (1988) denied federal funding to pro-choice (pro-abortion) programmes, *Webster v Reproductive Services of Missouri* (1989) said states could deny women access to public abortion facilities, and the *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v Casey* (1992) ruling upheld a Pennsylvania state law that required women to undergo counselling on abortion and then wait 24 hours before the abortion. However, the court struck down the Pennsylvania provision that a married woman had to produce 'a signed statement that she has notified her spouse that she is about to undergo an abortion'. Reagan appointee Justice Sandra Day O'Connor persuasively argued that the many women who were victims of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of their husbands would have good reasons not to tell them about an abortion. Anti-abortionists were not particularly pleased with the 1992 ruling, but they applauded the Bush administration's declaration of support for an anti-abortion constitutional amendment (the Democrat Congress rejected that idea).

Clinton was able to counter Reaganism over abortion. Abortion facilities were restored in federally funded clinics, and the two liberals he nominated to the Supreme Court were accepted by Congress. Bush had forbidden doctors working in federally funded clinics to give advice on abortion, stopped military hospitals performing abortions, and cut off US funding to United Nations' agencies that tried to decrease the population of impoverished countries, but Clinton issued executive orders reversing these policies. Furthermore, a 1993 Supreme Court decision rejected a Louisiana state law that prohibited the vast majority of abortions, and polls showed that a majority of Americans were pro-choice. However, extremism flourished, as when pro-life activists shot a Florida gynaecologist outside an abortion clinic.

Homosexuality

The controversial nature of social change was reflected not only in clashes over abortion but also in changing attitudes towards homosexuality. Bush and

Clinton took relatively liberal positions: Bush said he would not mind having a gay Cabinet member, while Clinton sought to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the military. However, such was the opposition from the military chiefs and veterans that Clinton had to compromise with a 'don't ask, don't tell' formula that pleased no one.

Permissiveness

Bill Clinton's sex life was a good illustration of the debates between social conservatives and liberals over the permissive society. During Clinton's 1992 campaign, a woman who had had a 12-year affair with the married Clinton while he was Governor of Arkansas hit the headlines. However, Hillary Clinton stood by her man and the scandal did not seem to hurt Clinton in the presidential election. In 1994, Paula Jones sued Clinton for sexual harassment and her lawyers called in other Clinton girlfriends such as Monica Lewinsky. When in January 1994 Clinton appointed a special counsel to investigate his supposedly illegal property dealings while Governor, that counsel focused more on Clinton's affair with the 21-year-old White House intern Lewinsky, which had begun in 1995. While the Supreme Court threw out Jones' suit, 'Monicagate' was front-page news during 1998, throughout which time Clinton was somewhat distracted from government. Clinton first denied then admitted the affair. Republicans attempted to impeach him, but his job approval ratings remained high. Furthermore, the Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich was forced to resign over an extramarital affair and his Republican successor was also revealed to be an adulterer. Republican Congressman Henry Hyde was due to preside over the impeachment hearings until it was revealed that he too had had an extramarital affair 40 years before. Despite the sex scandals, Bill Clinton left office with an approval rating of over 70 per cent – the highest since Kennedy's death. Many **baby boomers** obviously felt few Americans' sex lives would stand up to such scrutiny – a reflection on the changing social attitudes that proponents of 'family values' so opposed.

Race

There were limits to the extent of social change with regard to race. Andrew Hacker's influential book *Two Nations* (1992) claimed that 'a huge racial chasm remains' between black and white, and he could well have said the same about relations between whites and Hispanic-Americans and Native Americans.

Political status

African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans were increasingly well represented in government and politics. For example, Colin Powell headed the **JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff)** under Bush and during the 1980s, NAACP lawyers won hundreds of cases that led to changes to congressional districts and voting systems and assisted the election of thousands of black and Hispanic officials by the 1990s. The number of black congressmen increased from 45 in 1990 to 69 in 1992, in which year there were 17 Hispanic-American congressmen. During



KEY TERMS

Baby boomers Americans born in the post-Second World War population boom, roughly 1945–60.

JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff)
The heads of the US Army, Navy and Air Force.

the 1990s, however, Carol Moseley Braun from Illinois was the sole black senator and only the second elected to the US Senate in the twentieth century. There was no Hispanic-American Senator.

Status in the legal system

By 1992, African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans commonly perceived law enforcement and the legal system as characterised by racism. For example, after a high-speed car chase in Los Angeles in 1992, white police caught up with black suspect Rodney King and were filmed beating him up. Riots erupted in Los Angeles when an all-white jury found the police innocent: 55 died, 2300 were injured. Black communities also rioted in Atlanta, Birmingham and Chicago.

A disproportionate number of black males were in jail. A common black viewpoint was that this denoted unequal black status and that the police unfairly victimised African-Americans. White conservatives insisted that African-Americans were more likely to commit crime, while white liberals pointed out that poor education and a high unemployment rate contributed to black involvement in crime, drugs and gang turf wars.

Although Native-American tribes had increased powers of law enforcement on reservations after 1974 (see page 179), they remained caught between their cultural traditions and the dominant legal system, as in 1990 when the Supreme Court ruled that states could deny employment to peyote (see page 179) users because peyote was an illicit drug, not a sacrament (Natives customarily used peyote for religious experiences).

Economic status

With the exception of Asian-Americans, racial minorities remained on average poorer than white Americans. Over one quarter of black Americans, Hispanic-Americans and Native Americans continued to live below the poverty line, and their average household income was roughly half the national average.

On the other hand, the black and Hispanic middle classes were growing. This owed much to federal government policies. For example, affirmative action (see page 137) helped change the economic status of ethnic minorities by enhancing their opportunities in and for employment. However, the battle between conservatives and liberals over affirmative action continued. For example, the Supreme Court limited the scope of affirmative action programmes in *City of Richmond v Croson* (1989), to which the Democrat-controlled Congress responded with a civil rights bill (1990) that President Bush vetoed. The Democrats had to accept a modified version (1991).

Social status

In some ways, the social status of ethnic minorities seemed to be changing. By 1992, half the black population lived in neighbourhoods that were over 50 per cent white and interracial marriages/partnerships were slowly rising. In 1988, 43 per cent of black schoolchildren in the South attended schools that were over

50 per cent white. On the other hand, 9 per cent of African-Americans continued to live in segregated, overcrowded and impoverished inner-city ghettos where life expectancy was lower and schools remained poorly funded and segregated. Continuing white opposition to integration demonstrated that black social status remained inferior. Furthermore, Southern schools were being resegregated during the 1980s and 1990s, and between 1968 and 1995 the proportion of Hispanic-Americans in majority-minority schools rose from 55 to 74 per cent.

Conservatives and liberals continued to disagree over measures that would increase racial toleration and integration. For example, both Reagan appointee Chief Justice William Rehnquist and President Reagan made derogatory remarks about 'inferior' Native American culture, but Congress demonstrated respect in a Native American Grave Protection and Reparation Act (1990) that enabled Natives to retrieve remains of their ancestors from museums and universities. The Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of Art, 'The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920', emphasised white mistreatment of Native Americans but infuriated conservatives and led some Republicans to threaten to cut the museum's budget. Conservatives were not the only threat to tolerance of racial minority assertiveness. The liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr's *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1991) lamented the 'cult of ethnicity' as divisive. Right-wing Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, an African-American, argued that racial minority demands for greater recognition and toleration were generating a white backlash and making progress on integration and equality less likely. Overall then, the nature of progress towards racial equality was slow, hesitant and divisive.

Women

By 1996, women's reproductive rights remained under frequent threat. Women's economic status was improving but remained inferior to that of men. Women remained proportionately underrepresented in government at all levels, from state legislatures to the federal government. The numbers elected to the US Congress had improved by 1991–2, with 28 women in the House of Representatives and two in the Senate. 1992 was a real turning point, thanks primarily to President George H.W. Bush's nomination of African-American Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Back in 1969, black Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm had said 'in the political world I have been far oftener discriminated against because I am a woman than because I am black'. That sexism remained more acceptable than racism was evident in the 1991 confirmation hearings of Thomas, who was accused of sexual harassment by black law professor Anita Hill. The 98 per cent male Senate's dismissal of Hill's accusations revitalised women campaigners who had been relatively quiet amidst the prevailing conservatism of the era. In combination with the Democrat focus upon the underrepresentation of women in Congress and declaration that 1992 was the 'Year of the Woman', the Thomas case prompted unprecedented numbers of women to stand for local, state and national office in

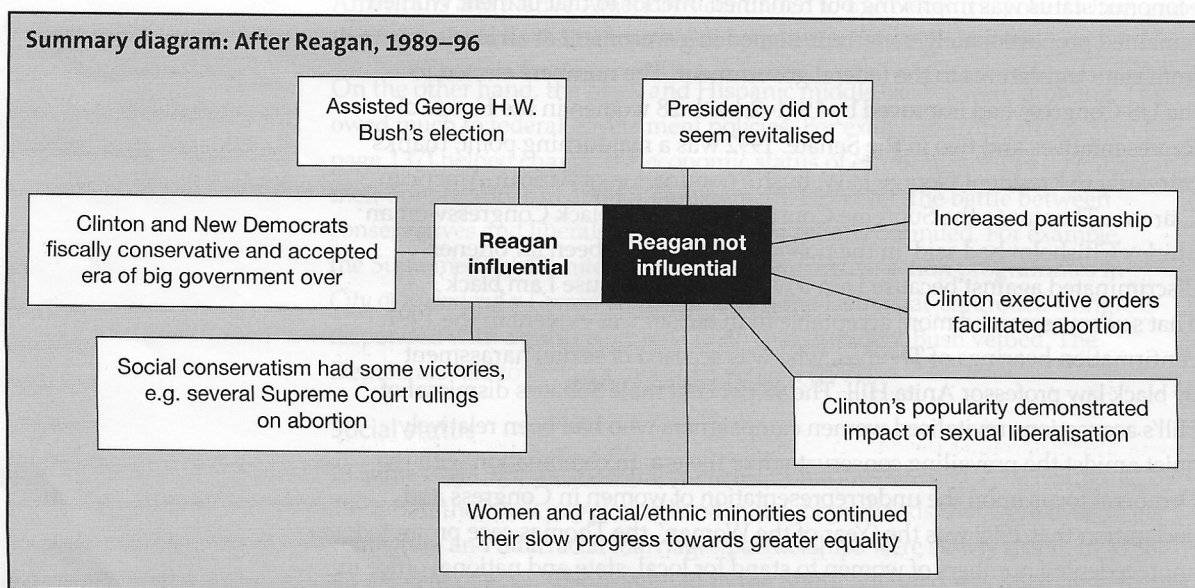
1992. As a result, the number of women elected doubled: in the new Congress in January 1993 there were 47 women in the House and seven women in the Senate. Nevertheless, that still constituted a dramatic underrepresentation.

Conclusions about the extent of social change

President Reagan and the Religious Right would have felt more comfortable in the society and politics of 1950s' America. They tried to turn the clock back to a time when abortion was illegal, middle-class women knew that their place was in the home, homosexuals kept quiet, affirmative action was unheard of, and popular culture was not full of sex and violence. Politically, Reagan made it quite clear he would have been more comfortable in the pre-New Deal era of Republican President Calvin Coolidge. Reagan quickly put Coolidge's portrait in a more prominent position in the White House, and suggested life was better under Coolidge, when the federal government rarely impinged upon the lives of citizens and did not bail them out when they were in trouble.

Reagan and the Religious Right did not manage to turn the clock back, but it could be argued that they slowed it down. They strengthened conservatism in society and government. However, the forces of change that had been unleashed since the 1960s were by now too powerful and Reagan and the Religious Right were unable to silence advocates of equality such as feminists, homosexuals and ethnic minorities, who proved able for the most part to hold on to the advances made since the 1960s.

These battles between liberals and conservatives over social and governmental issues made America a far more openly polarised society than it had been in the 1950s, when the inequalities were comparatively hidden, the unequal were comparatively silent, and a moderate Republican President was comparatively resigned to the expanded role of the federal government.



7 Historians and interpretations of Reagan

► How and why do historians disagree over Reagan's presidency?

Detailed studies of the Reagan presidency by academic historians are a relatively recent phenomenon. Previously, most studies have been:

- memoirs of those who served in the Reagan administration, such as David Stockman (1986), **Edwin Meese** (1992), Mike Deaver (2001) and James Baker (2006)
- journalistic accounts such as Lou Cannon's highly regarded 1991 biography
- studies by contemporary social scientists.

Reagan's politics polarised Americans and this has been reflected in many assessments. Historians' opinions of Reagan are often shaped by their political leanings. As a result, there have been highly critical accounts by historians with liberal leanings and fulsome praise from the more conservative. There are both liberals and conservatives who perceive Reagan as successful and achieving his aims, but also liberals and conservatives who see his achievements as limited. Some historians, such as Gil Troy (2005), boast of having taken the middle ground between hero worship and hatred. The emotions aroused by Reagan probably account for the lack of any universally accepted standard study of the Reagan years.

Whether they have a liberal or conservative agenda, most historians agree that Reagan influenced national political and economic thinking more than any President since Franklin Roosevelt. As the nature of Reagan's presidency has been so influential and polarising and as his presidency is relatively recent, there have been some bitter debates among historians about treatment of the Reagan years.

The difficulties of writing an unprejudiced historical account of such a recent, controversial and influential figure are demonstrated by the respected and prolific liberal historian Robert Dallek. In 1984, Dallek attempted what he called an exercise in contemporary history, but historian Chester J. Pach (2015) described Dallek's 1984 account of Reagan as 'a polemic with a veneer of history'. By 1999, however, Dallek confessed that he appreciated Reagan more, especially his skill at restoring confidence in the presidency and in ending the Cold War. Dallek said that he now considered Reagan 'a more skilled and effective political leader' than George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

One of the most frequently cited historians on the period is the liberal Princeton professor Sean Wilentz, but his *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (2008) received a scathing review by another eminent historian, Douglas Brinkley. Brinkley, who edited the Reagan diaries, pointed out that Wilentz's specialism



KEY FIGURE

Ed (Edwin) Meese (1931–)

Served Ronald Reagan while Reagan was Governor of California. He was Counsellor to the President (1981–5) then Attorney General (1985–8) during the Reagan presidency. Generally considered to have been highly influential and able during Reagan's first term.

was nineteenth-century history and notes that Wilentz 'admits to conducting no interviews, and relies on secondary sources and already released primary documents'.

Clearly then, the Reagan years are fertile grounds for studying how historians disagree, change their minds, and frequently fail to attain objectivity because of their own political, economic and social beliefs. The following sections cover some aspects of the Reagan years over which historians disagree.

Was there a Reagan Revolution?

Not everyone believes that there was a Reagan Revolution in politics, society or the economy. Jacobs and Zelizer (2011) emphasised how the liberal opposition constituted a powerful constraint and Schoenwald (2011) thought that constraint ended any chance of a conservative revolution as soon as Reagan entered the White House. W. Elliott Brownlee (2015) argued that, 'While Reagan did not produce any revolution in economic policy ... Republican leaders later created and sustained the myth that he had and this myth became an important component of his legacy.'

On the other hand, those who believe there was some kind of a revolution are in the majority. Sandra Scanlon (2015) opined, 'Historians of the 1980s have broadly endorsed the view that Reagan altered the political landscape and consolidated conservatives' power in the Republican Party.' Similarly, Gil Troy (2009) argued that by 1990 there had been great changes that owed much to Reagan: 'American politics was more conservative. American capitalism was more aggressive. American society was more individualistic.'

Some historians have preferred to sit on the fence about some or all aspects of any Reagan Revolution. In 2003, James T. Patterson argued that it is 'excessive' to claim that there was a Reagan Revolution, but he admitted that it was 'still too close' to his presidency to get 'assured judgments about his legacy'.

Amongst those who believe there was a revolution, there are debates as to when the revolution started and who started it. Matthew Dallek (2000) said the 'real Reagan Revolution' started 'as a debate about retaking control of a society in chaos' in California in 1966. Reagan's adviser Martin Anderson (1990) argued that the Reagan Revolution was the culmination of a movement that began with Barry Goldwater, and that Reagan caught the changing tide of public opinion and gave the movement focus and leadership but not life. Michael Anderson (2015) contended that with regard to business, labour and deregulation, 'Overall, the administration accelerated trends more than it broke with the past', citing President Carter's deregulation as an example of previous trends.

There are also debates over the nature of the Reagan Revolution. While Jeremy Kuzmarov (2015) said, 'The Reagan revolution was, at its core, a backlash against the social movements and the counterculture of the 1960s', others such as Scanlon emphasised a revolution in political thought, with a new emphasis

on ending 'big government' that entailed deregulation and cuts in taxation and social programmes. Historian Samuel Hayes (1987) focused on 'the Reagan Anti-environmental Revolution'.

The extent of Reagan's commitment to what sounded like a revolutionary agenda during his 1980 campaign is much debated. The debate is usually framed in terms of 'ideologue or pragmatist?' Most historians follow the lead of administration member David Stockman, who wrote in 1986 that the 'true Reagan revolution never had a chance' because Reagan was 'a consensus politician, not an ideologue'. Dueck (2010) agreed the Reagan was a pragmatist and saw that as the key to his success: 'Reagan changed the terms of debate in American politics, and by refusing to overreach either domestically or internationally, he ensured that Republican conservatism would continue to be a dominant political force years after he left office'.

A confused and confusing President

While liberal historians might be expected to criticise Reagan's economic policies, his massive expenditure upon defence and his creation of many new jobs in that area constituted the government activism and job creation in which liberals believe. Similarly, while conservative historians might be expected to praise Reagan's economic policies, that expenditure massively increased the federal government deficit and was representative of the big-spending 'big government' so hated by conservatives.

Did Reagan revitalise the presidency and politics?

Reagan's presidency convinced many that the presidency remained a workable institution. Robert Dallek (1999) said Reagan's effective use of the mass media 'did more to restore a measure of confidence in the institution of the presidency than anything since the Kennedy administration'. However, when Dallek questioned the presidential leadership abilities of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, he thereby suggested that any revitalisation of the presidency was short lived and dependent upon individual Presidents and situations.

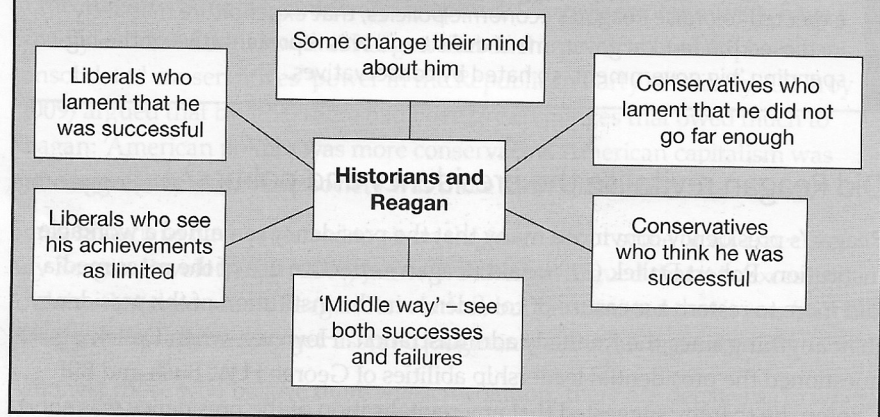
If there was a revitalisation of politics, the question arises as to whether Reagan bears sole responsibility. Reagan himself attributed revitalisation to others when he addressed a religious revivalist meeting in Dallas in 1980 and praised his audience for bringing 'a new vitality' to US politics. Of course, the rise of the Religious Right made politics far more partisan, especially after Reagan left the White House. Political commentator Chris Matthews, a former aide of Tip O'Neill, recalled the Reagan years as a time 'when politics worked' in that it was less partisan. However, bipartisanship disappeared with the Great Communicator himself. Indeed, he played a big part in the disappearance, because the conservatives whom he had so enthused and the liberals he had so antagonised continued to wage passionate culture wars.

Was there a social revolution?

According to Matthew Avery Sutton (2015), 'One thing is clear ... Ronald Reagan presided over an unprecedented transformation of American politics and culture.' While many would agree about the political transformation, the cultural transformation is less certain. Social conservatives made few tangible gains in the 1980s and many of them felt Reagan focused overmuch on economic and foreign policy issues at the expense of their social agenda. Both sides had triumphs and disasters during and after the Reagan years – according to one historian, God and sex simply had to continue to coexist.

Within the social revolution debate there are questions about Reagan's public support of the principles of equality – was that support symbolic rather than substantive? Or was he a genuine believer in 'colour-blind' politics and in gender equality? If he was, he did little to promote either of them – but that might have been due to his opposition to big government, or simply lack of interest, or other emphases. Here, as always, Reagan offers much to debate.

Summary diagram: Historians and interpretations of Reagan



Chapter summary

Reagan came to the presidency with both media and executive leadership experience and an economically, politically and socially conservative agenda. In 1981, he persuaded Congress to accept cuts in taxes and federal social programmes. Although subsequently forced to accept tax rises (primarily because of his defence expenditure), he managed some reductions in 'big government' in the areas of welfare and deregulation.

His grace, amiability and humour, along with a period of economic prosperity which owed much to factors other than his 'supply-side' economics, made him a popular President. However, poorer Americans and many workers suffered during his presidency. The rich got richer and subsequent

generations were bequeathed a massive federal deficit.

Historians generally agree that Reagan changed the trajectory of American politics, helping reverse the Democrat liberalism that had dominated political discourse since President Franklin Roosevelt. However, although Reagan and the New Right and Religious Right staged a rear-guard action against social change and made life uncomfortable for liberals, there was no turning the clock back to traditional 'family values'. Reagan has been credited with the revitalisation of the presidency and politics, but these were short-term achievements.

Reagan is one of the most controversial of Presidents and historians have varying views on the Reagan years, which makes for an interesting study in historical interpretations, for example, over whether there was any 'Reagan Revolution'.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

- 1 In what areas has it been argued that there was a Reagan Revolution?
- 2 Which federal social programmes did Reagan never attack?
- 3 Name one historian who claims to have taken the middle ground in assessing Reagan.
- 4 Who was the House Speaker in the Reagan years?
- 5 Who launched the 'Just Say No' campaign?
- 6 What was supply-side economics?
- 7 What pre-presidential executive experience did Reagan have?
- 8 What percentage of federal judges were Reagan and George H.W. Bush appointees by 1992?
- 9 What was the Iran–Contra scandal?
- 10 Which Reagan Supreme Court nomination was rejected?