America Since Watergate

U.S. History
Dr. Donnelly
President Gerald Ford

- Ford, a Republican, was president from 1974-77 (succeeded from VP to president when Nixon resigned).
- Had to face a public and Congress that were suspicious of the White House, high inflation, and being the butt of many jokes on the new hit TV show, *Saturday Night Live*.
Freedom of Information Act

- The Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, was passed after the Watergate scandal to make the government more transparent.
- It requires government records to be open to the public.
- “The hippies finally got something right. Just kiddin’. But not really.” Check out this clip, starting at the 2-minute mark:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbNpSWrlESA
Inflation

- High spending by Congress led to 12% inflation (increase in prices from one year to the next) in 1974.
- Anything over 3% to 5% inflation is usually considered bad – 12% is disastrous.
- Luckily, inflation dropped back to 5% by 1976; unfortunately, it would go back up again in the late ‘70s.
Energy Crisis

- Oil was only $1/barrel (and gas was only about 25 cents/gallon!) before 1970.
- Then OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) began raising the price of oil – even embargoed oil to the U.S. in 1973 because the U.S. supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War.
- This drove the price of oil up to $17/barrel – raised gas prices, caused panic and gasoline shortages.
Dealing with the energy crisis

- Government plan to deal with the energy crisis included using more coal & nuclear power and completing the Alaska oil pipeline to supply more U.S. oil to compete with OPEC.

- Also, states were pushed to enact 55-mph speed limits nationwide (driving slower results in better gas mileage).
Blockbusters!

- In 1975, *Jaws* became the highest-grossing movie of all time; in 1977, *Star Wars* broke that record.
- These record-setting movies started the modern era of summer blockbuster movies.
- President Reagan’s SDI missile-defense program was later nicknamed “Star Wars” – Reagan said, “Why not? It’s a good movie. Besides, the good guys won.”
President Jimmy Carter

- Carter, a Democrat from Georgia, was president from 1977 to 1981.
- He was a navy veteran, a peanut farmer, and former Governor of Georgia.
- He is mostly remembered as a weak leader who presided over one of the lowest points in American history.
- He’s also the only president ever to have reported seeing a UFO, and claimed to have been attacked by a large swimming rabbit.
Problems under Carter

- High inflation returned, energy crisis continued.
- Near-meltdown at Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1979 raised fears about nuclear energy – no new nuke plants built in U.S. since then.
- SALT II Treaty negotiated by Carter with USSR, but rejected by U.S. Senate.
- Oil prices hit $41/barrel by 1979, gasoline prices hit all-time high.
- Economy was terrible.
The Camp David Accords

- Carter hosted Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin at Camp David in 1978.
- Israel and Egypt agreed to a peace treaty in 1979 – this was Carter’s main (only?) foreign policy success.
The Iran Hostage Crisis

- November 4, 1979: radical Iranian Muslims led by Ayatollah Khomeini take over U.S. Embassy in Tehran (capital of Iran) and take American workers there hostage.
- 52 Americans were held hostage until January 20, 1981 (444 days).
- Carter responded by freezing Iran’s assets in the U.S., stopping import of Iranian oil to U.S., and deporting some Iranians.
- Carter’s rescue attempt on April 24, 1980, Operation Eagle Claw, failed – 8 commandos died.
- After this, Carter was seen as weak and helpless against Iran.
Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

- Again, President Carter seemed helpless.
The Miracle on Ice

- 1980 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, New York: right after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the U.S. hockey team miraculously upset the heavily favored Soviet team, then beat Finland for the gold medal.
- This should always be remembered: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYRVZX3J2uQ
Olympic Politics

- In protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter announced that the U.S. would boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow (USSR) – 61 other countries also joined the boycott.

- In 1984, the Soviets (and all the other communist countries) retaliated by boycotting the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.
Carter’s legacy: ouch...
Carter vs. Reagan

By 1980, President Carter’s approval rating was down to a measly 25%.

Ted Kennedy even ran against Carter for the Democratic Party nomination – although Carter held off Kennedy, he had no chance against...

Ronald Reagan, the Republican candidate, who won 489 electoral votes vs. Carter’s 49.

A former actor and governor of California, Reagan had a great sense of humor – he was also the oldest man ever elected president (age 69 in 1980).

Here’s Reagan telling Soviet jokes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN3z3eSVG7A
A strong start for Reagan

- The day Reagan was inaugurated – January 20, 1981 – the Iran Hostage Crisis ended, as the Iranians set all 52 hostages free.
- Reagan appointed the first female Supreme Court justice – Sandra Day O’Connor.
- On March 30, 1981, Reagan was shot by lunatic John Hinckley, Jr. – not only did Reagan survive the assassination attempt, his courage and sense of humor (“I hope you guys are all Republicans” he said in the operating room) about nearly being assassinated increased his popularity.
What Reagan Did - Economics

- Reagan believed “government is not the solution to the problem – government IS the problem!”
- Cut taxes and most government spending, cut number of tax brackets from 15 to 4 to simplify the tax code.
- Supply-side economics: tax cuts for wealthy & big business so they would have more money left to hire & pay their employees, which would help the economy.
- Even though tax rates were lower, government tax revenues doubled because there were now more people paying taxes.
What Reagan Did – The Cold War

- Called the USSR an “Evil Empire” – elites were shocked that Reagan would be so “impolite,” but mainstream Americans liked it – and it helped pressure the Soviets to negotiate with us.

- Increased military spending - planned to win the Cold War by “spending the Soviets into oblivion.”

- This changed U.S. foreign policy from containment of communism to aggressively pressuring the Soviets and really trying to win the Cold War.

- Called for more nuclear weapons and placed nuclear missiles in Western Europe to counter Soviet nukes in Eastern Europe.
Soviet Leadership Changes

- Old Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982; was replaced by Yuri Andropov, but he died in 1984; was replaced by Konstantin Chernenko, but he died in 1985!
- Mikhail Gorbachev then became Premier of the USSR & would remain so until USSR collapsed in 1991.
Scary Times

- Americans and Soviets lived in fear of nuclear war, reflected by movies like *The Day After*, *War Games*, and *Red Dawn*.
- In real life, the Soviets shot down Korean Air Lines flight 007 on Sept. 1, 1983, killing 269 people.
- On Sept. 26, 1983, the Soviets almost launched a nuclear attack on the U.S. due to a false missile warning shown by the Soviet Air Defense forces computers – eerily similar to the movie *War Games* that had come out earlier that year!
The Boland Amendments

- Between 1982 and 1984, Congress passed three riders called the Boland Amendments, which said that no U.S. gov’t. money or training could be used to help anti-communist Contras in Nicaragua to overthrow the communist Sandinista government there.

- Reagan opposed the Boland Amendments and encouraged his staff to keep looking for ways to help the Contras.
Beirut

- Beirut (capital of Lebanon) was once a beautiful city (and now is again) but was being destroyed by battles between Muslims and Christians by the 1980s.
- Reagan sent Marines to Beirut to keep the peace & protect Americans who lived & worked there.
- Our Marines became targets for terrorists who claimed the U.S. was favoring the Christians.
- A suicide bomber blew up one of our Marine barracks on Oct. 23, 1983, killing 220 Marines as they slept.
- Reagan then withdrew our troops from Beirut.
Grenada

- October 25, 1983: Reagan sent Marines to Grenada, a Caribbean island under attack by Cuban-backed communist rebels.

- Because there were American medical school students on Grenada, the Marines were sent to protect their safety – as well as to support Grenada’s government.

- The Marines easily defeated the communist forces.
Reagan is Reelected

- In the 1984 election, Reagan easily defeated Democrat Walter Mondale.
- Reagan won 49 out of 50 states, 525 out of 538 electoral votes, and 59% of the popular vote to Mondale’s 41%.
- Reagan’s popularity resulted in the nickname “the Teflon President” (because nothing bad ever stuck to him).
- He was also called “the Great Communicator.”
Terrorism in the 1980s

- June 14, 1985: TWA Flight 847 from Athens to Rome was hijacked by Muslim terrorists (Hezbollah), who killed an American passenger (Navy Petty Officer Robert Stethem).
- October 7, 1985: cruise ship *Achille Lauro* was hijacked by terrorists, who murdered handicapped Jewish-American Leon Klinghoffer and dumped his body overboard.
- April 5, 1986: terrorists bombed a disco in West Berlin, killing 3 U.S. soldiers & a Turkish woman, and wounding 230.
- Several airports were also bombed by terrorists.
Reagan vs. Quaddafi

- Most of the terrorist acts in 1985 and 1986 were linked to Libyan dictator Moammar Quaddafi.
- Even Back to the Future had Libyan terrorists: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xANWhMQfec4
- April 14, 1986: Operation El Dorado Canyon – Reagan ordered air strikes on Libya at Tripoli and Benghazi, which killed dozens of Quaddafi’s top military officers.
- Quaddafi himself escaped but was brought to his weakest point since the late 1960s.
December 21, 1988: Pan Am Flight 103 was blown up by Libyan terrorists over Lockerbie, Scotland.

270 were killed, including 11 people on the ground hit by falling wreckage of the Boeing 747 jet.

Quaddafi gave shelter to the two terrorists accused of the bombing, until turning them over in 1999.

In 2003, Quaddafi took responsibility for the bombing and paid $8 million each to the families of all 270 victims.
The Challenger Disaster

January 28, 1986: the U.S. space shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after takeoff. All seven crew members died, including “first teacher in space” Christa McAuliffe. The shuttle fleet was grounded for the next two years for safety reviews.
The Iran-Contra Scandal

- Iran-Contra was the only scandal to “stick” to Reagan, at least temporarily.
  - Reagan’s approval rating dropped from 67% to 46% during the scandal, but was back up to 64% by the time he left office.
- It resulted from Reagan’s desire to free Americans held hostage by terrorists in Lebanon, and from the Boland Amendments, which prevented U.S. aid to the Contras in Nicaragua (Contras were fighting the communist Sandinista government there).
- To find a way to keep helping the Contras, Reagan’s CIA head, William Casey, devised a plan for indirectly funneling money to them.
How the Plan Worked

- In 1986, U.S. gave weapons to Israel, which sold them to Iran.
- Iran used influence to get Americans taken hostage by Hezbollah in Lebanon set free.
- Iran paid Israel for the weapons.
- Israel put the money in a Swiss bank account.
- Money from the Swiss bank account paid for aid to Contras in Nicaragua – this violated the Boland Amendments.
How it became a scandal

- The Sandinistas shot down a plane delivering weapons & supplies to the Contras – surviving crew member was ID’d as working for the CIA.
- This showed that the U.S. was aiding the Contras (which was illegal under the Boland amendments).
- Reagan had not ordered the “arms-for-hostages + money to the Contras” deal and did not know it was even going on until afterward – but was criticized as it being his fault because he’d encouraged his administration to find ways of helping the Contras.
The Iran-Contra Investigation

- Reagan appointed the Tower Commission to investigate Iran-Contra.
- In the end, 14, Reagan officials were indicted, including Sec. of Defense Weinberger.
- 11 were convicted, including National Security Adviser John Poindexter & Col. Oliver North – but both their convictions were overturned on appeal, and the rest were pardoned later by President George Bush.
- Reagan was found innocent of involvement in the scandal.
Reagan and Gorbachev

- Reagan wanted to reduce both sides’ number of nuclear missiles.
- At Reykjavik, Gorbachev refused to deal unless U.S. also got rid of SDI (Reagan’s “Star Wars” anti-nuclear missile system), so Reagan walked out without a deal.
Reagan Wins

• Reagan’s strategy of spending the Soviets into oblivion worked – the USSR was going broke trying to both keep up with the U.S. in the arms race and reform itself politically.

• By 1987, Gorbachev was desperate to make a deal and agreed to do so even if the U.S. kept SDI.

• This led to the 1987 INF Treaty – the U.S. and USSR both got rid of all intermediate-range nuclear missiles (and the U.S. kept SDI).

• This was the first time the number of nuclear weapons had actually been reduced.
Reagan’s Legacy

- Pressure by Reagan had encouraged the Soviets to reform and make the USSR more open to the outside world – Gorbachev called these reforms “glasnost” (openness) and “perestroika” (restructuring).
- The Soviets were going broke trying to keep up with our military spending; instead of saving the USSR, Gorbachev’s reforms exposed communism’s flaws & caused it to collapse quickly.
- In 1989, the Berlin Wall came down – the symbolic end of the Cold War.
- Communist regimes of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania all collapsed.
- Reagan’s legacy: he won the Cold War and is considered one of the 10 best presidents ever by historians.
President George H.W. Bush ("Bush 41")

- Republican (had been Reagan’s VP); won bitter 1988 election over Democrat Michael Dukakis. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9KMSSEZoY
- Lost his conservative base by breaking “no new taxes” promise when faced with $500 million Savings & Loan crisis and $200 million in nuclear waste cleanup.
- Approval rating reached record 92% when U.S.-led coalition defeated Iraq and drove Saddam Hussein’s forces out of Kuwait in early 1991 during Operation Desert Storm.
- But economic recession in 1992 left him vulnerable in race for reelection.
1992 Election

- Three-way race: H. Ross Perot challenged President Bush as a third-party candidate & won 18% of the popular vote; Bush won 37%; Democrat Bill Clinton won only 43% of popular vote – but that was enough.

- Clinton won 370 electoral votes to take the election.

- Clinton focused on criticizing Bush’s economic problems.

- Almost all Perot voters would have voted Republican if Perot wasn’t in the race – even though Perot won no electoral votes, he had a major effect on the elections outcome – basically, he ensured that Bush would lose!
President Bill Clinton

- Winning only 43% of the popular vote meant that President Clinton didn’t have a strong mandate from the people.
- He was hurt by character issues: accusations that he was a draft evader during the Vietnam War, admitted marijuana use in the 1960s (but claimed he didn’t inhale!), and “bimbo eruptions” – scandals about extramarital affairs.
Clinton’s Presidency

- Raised taxes but also cut spending.
- Appointed wife Hillary to create national healthcare plan, but it failed in Congress.
- Had to become more moderate as Republicans took control of both houses of Congress in 1994 and promised to cut back on government & balance the budget with their Contract with America (led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich).
- Reformed welfare (along with Congress) in 1996, putting limits on how long people could stay on welfare.
- Economy did well until late 1999, when recession began.
Clinton’s Problems

- Clinton was reelected over Republican Bob Dole in 1996, but had many problems.

  - All but the Oklahoma City bombing were carried out by Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda terrorist network. OKC bombing was done by anti-government extremist Timothy McVeigh (later executed).

- Several scandals: biggest was Whitewater (land & loan fraud in Arkansas) – Special Prosecutor Ken Starr’s investigation uncovered Clinton’s affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.
Clinton’s Woman Problems

- He (eventually) admitted to affairs with Gennifer Flowers and Monica Lewinsky.
- Was sued for sexual harassment by Paula Jones.
- Kathleen Willey & Juanita Broaddrick both claimed he sexually harassed them.
- Elizabeth Ward Gracen, Sally Perdue, & Dolly Kyle Browning all claimed to have had affairs with him.
- When his wife Hillary ran for president in 2008, two more possible affairs were reported.
Clinton is impeached

- Under oath in the Whitewater investigation, Clinton said he had not had sex with Monica Lewinsky.
- DNA evidence later proved this to be a lie, so Clinton had committed perjury.
- Late 1998: the House impeached Clinton for perjury & obstruction of justice in the Whitewater case; he was acquitted by the Senate, but his reputation had been further stained.
- Clinton is ranked by historians as an average president – in a 2000 C-SPAN poll, he was ranked #21, one spot behind George H.W. Bush at #20.
President George W. Bush (“Bush 43”)

- Republican; son of President George Bush; defeated Democrat Al Gore (lost popular vote but won electoral vote after controversial recount of votes in Florida).
- Presidency was defined by 9-11 (September 11, 2001 terror attacks), which led to the War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom.
- War on Terror began with quick victory over Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001; Bush’s approval rating soared over 80%.
- 9-11 news clips: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brSVsP2NUbs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brSVsP2NUbs)
Bush 43: The Rest

- Reelected over Democrat John Kerry in 2004.
- Signed No Child Left Behind law (sponsored in Congress by Ted Kennedy) – tying school funding to test scores as first suggested by President Clinton.
- Proposed to reform Social Security (failed in Congress).
- 2007 troop surge in Iraq succeeded as Iraq became safer & more orderly until most troops were later pulled out by President Obama.
- Recession began in 2008 – bailouts of banks & automakers “too big to fail” cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.
- Left office with approval ratings under 40%. 
President Barack Obama

- Democrat, elected in 2008; first black/biracial president.
- 2009 economic stimulus bill cost nearly $1 trillion but economy did not improve.
- Controversial health reform law (Affordable Care Act, or “Obamacare”) similar to the one that Hillary Clinton proposed in 1990s passed after long debate in Congress.
- Broke Bush 43’s records for highest deficits, most national debt, and most Americans on food stamps.
- Approval rating dropped from near 70% in 2009 to 43% in 2010 but was reelected in 2012.
- Approval rating has remained below 50% for most of presidency.
Getting Bin Laden

- Three presidents had tried to kill or capture Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden.
- Bill Clinton has been criticized for not getting Bin Laden and preventing 9/11 – he counters that he tried, but Bin Laden was always lucky enough to escape.
- George W. Bush spent massive resources hunting for Bin Laden after 9/11 – many Al Qaeda were killed or captured, but Bin Laden continued to hide/escape.
- May 1, 2011: during the Obama administration, Navy SEAL Team 6 killed Bin Laden after intelligence found he was in a hideout in Pakistan (near the Pakistani military academy!).
  - Robert O’Neill of Butte, Montana was the SEAL who shot Bin Laden.
- Al Qaeda and ISIS still continue to be major terrorist threats.