

CHAPTER
24

Summary

TELESCOPING THE TIMES *An Age of Limits*

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *Richard Nixon takes office as president, halting the growth of federal power and changing foreign policy. He resigns in disgrace during his second term, and his successors are unable to fix growing economic problems.*

❶ The Nixon Administration

MAIN IDEA *President Richard M. Nixon tried to steer the country in a conservative direction and away from federal control.*

Richard Nixon pursued conservative policies. To cut the influence of the federal government, he introduced revenue sharing. This policy gave local and state governments more freedom to spend federal aid. Nixon wanted to reform welfare, but his plan failed to pass Congress.

At first Nixon cooperated with Congress, which Democrats controlled. Soon he refused to spend money voted by Congress on programs that he did not like. The Supreme Court ruled this action unconstitutional. Beginning a policy of law and order, Nixon enlisted the CIA and IRS to harass his “enemies”—liberals and dissidents.

Nixon hoped to bolster his political support—especially in the South—to ensure his reelection. He tried to slow school integration, but the Supreme Court ordered the administration to move more quickly. He also named conservatives to fill vacancies in the Supreme Court.

A stagnant economy troubled the country. By 1973, the inflation rate had doubled, and the unemployment rate was up fifty percent. The causes were high spending on the Vietnam War, growing foreign competition, and the difficulty of finding jobs for millions of new workers. Another problem was reduced supply of and higher prices for oil and gasoline. Nixon’s efforts to lower prices did not work.

Nixon dramatically changed U.S. relations with Communist countries. He eased Cold War tensions. He ended the war with Vietnam. In 1972, he visited Communist China. This reversed past U.S. policy, which had refused to formally recognize the Communist rulers there. Three months later, Nixon went to the Soviet Union. These moves were widely popular. With the Soviets, he signed the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT), which limited nuclear weapons. Foreign policy triumphs helped Nixon easily win re-election.

❷ Watergate: Nixon’s Downfall

MAIN IDEA *President Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate scandal forced him to resign from office.*

The Watergate scandal was caused by an illegal break-in and attempts to block the investigation of it. The affair tested the idea that no one—not even a president—is above the law.

Nixon campaign aides were determined to win his re-election by any means necessary. They hired five men to raid Democratic party offices in a Washington, D.C., complex called Watergate. Hoping to photograph files and place taps on phones, the men were caught. Rather than forcing those involved to resign, the administration tried to hide the link to the White House.

After Nixon’s re-election, the cover-up began to unravel. One of the burglars said that the White House was involved. Soon three top Nixon aides, who had been involved, resigned. In Senate hearings—televised live—one of them said that Nixon had known of the cover-up. When it was revealed that White House meetings had been tape recorded, the Senate committee demanded the tapes. Nixon refused to turn them over. Court battles over the tapes lasted a year.

In March 1974, a grand jury charged seven Nixon aides with obstruction of justice and perjury, or lying under oath. Nixon released more than 1,250 pages of taped conversations—but withheld conversations on some key dates. In July 1974 the Supreme Court ordered the White House to release the tapes. Three days later a House committee voted to impeach President Nixon. If the full House approved, Nixon would go to trial in the Senate. If judged guilty there, he would be removed from office. When the tapes were finally released, it was clear that Nixon had known of the cover-up. On August 8, 1974, he resigned but defiantly refused to admit guilt.

3 The Ford and Carter Years

MAIN IDEA *The Ford and Carter administrations attempted to remedy the nation's worst economic crisis in decades.*

Succeeding Richard Nixon was Gerald Ford. Though likable and honest, Ford lost support when he pardoned Nixon. Ford faced a poor economy, with prices rising 6 to 11 percent a year fueled by sharp increases in the cost of foreign oil. His first program to halt inflation by encouraging energy conservation failed. When he pushed for high interest rates, a recession was the result.

Ford ran for election in 1976 against Democrat Jimmy Carter. An outsider not involved in Washington politics, Carter promised he would never lie to Americans. He won a close election at a time of cynicism towards the Washington establishment.

Worried about the nation's reliance on imported oil, Carter believed that energy policy should be his top priority. The National Energy Act placed a tax on cars that had low gas mileage, removed price controls on domestic oil and natural gas, and funded research for new sources of energy. In 1979, however, another shutdown of oil imports plus steep oil price hikes crippled the economy. Carter tried voluntary price freezes and spending cuts but could not halt inflation.

The economic problems of the 1970s were caused in part by changes in the economy. Greater automation meant fewer manufacturing jobs. Foreign competition cost American jobs too. Many companies were leaving the industrialized northeast for the South and West to find lower energy costs and less costly labor.

In foreign policy, Carter tried to follow moral principles. He cut aid to countries that violated the rights of their people. He agreed to treaties with Panama that promised to give control of the Panama Canal to that country. He signed a new nuclear arms treaty—called SALT II—with the Soviets. But when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, relations cooled and the treaty died.

Carter arranged a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. Just months later, Muslim fundamentalists seized power in Iran. Angered at U.S. support for the former ruler, the shah, they took control of the American embassy in Iran's capital and held 52 Americans hostage. Despite efforts,

Carter could not obtain release of the hostages. They were held for 444 days, freed just minutes after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated on January 20, 1981, as the new president.

4 Environmental Activism

MAIN IDEA *During the 1970s, Americans strengthened their efforts to address the nation's environmental activism.*

Concern for the environment was spurred by the 1962 book *Silent Spring*. That book argued that pesticides were poisoning food and killing birds and fish. Awakened to this threat, the environmental movement took off on April 22, 1970—the first celebration of Earth Day. The day was marked by events aimed at raising awareness of environmental problems.

President Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency. He also signed the Clean Air Act, which required industry to take steps to reduce pollution from smokestacks and automobiles. Other new laws to protect the environment were passed as well.

When vast oil reserves were discovered in Alaska, oil companies built a huge pipeline to carry the oil to the sea. Nixon and Carter took steps to ensure that this industrial development did not harm Alaska's natural resources.

Nuclear energy became the focus of a growing debate. Some felt it was safe and clean. Others feared nuclear accidents. A 1979 accident caused a Pennsylvania nuclear reactor to release radiation into the air. Afterwards, the government strengthened safety measures for nuclear plants.

The debate over the environment continues today. Some Americans oppose environmental laws. They argue that such laws protect wildlife at the expense of people and limit economic growth.

Review

1. How did Nixon ease Cold War tensions?
2. Why was Watergate a constitutional crisis?
3. How did Ford and Carter try to fix economic problems, and why didn't their plans work?
4. What differing needs are the focus of the debate over environmental laws?