

Year 3:

Unit 5

Crisis of Confidence - Malaise in the 1970s (1968 - 1980): Introduction

Unit Purpose: Why This Unit?

The year 1968 was a turning point in U.S. history, as scholars learned in Unit 4. In the minds of the “silent majority” in the United States, the protest movements for equality that permeated the 1960s were the cause of the social upheaval and violence of the decade. These Americans were searching for peace and stability and found it in Richard Nixon, who appealed to their interests through a campaign promise of restoring “law and order.” Richard Nixon’s election ushered in an era of conservatism that would last until the mid-1970s.

Despite the resistance of the silent majority and the era of conservatism, protest movements that started in the 1960s continued in the 1970s, and new movements, such as environmentalism, emerged. At the same time, tense crises, such as the oil embargo, captured national attention. When Nixon took office in 1969, he promised to rein in the government spending of Johnson’s Great Society, while also ending the Vietnam War. Although it took Nixon four years to get the United States out of Vietnam, Nixon did successfully cool Cold War tensions, ushering in an era of “détente.” However, when records were leaked that Nixon had attempted to spy on his Democratic opponent for reelection, the president resigned in shame. Vice President Gerald Ford continued Nixon’s domestic and foreign policies; however, a period of economic stagflation that had begun during Nixon’s presidency worsened during Ford’s presidency, resulting in the election of Democrat Jimmy Carter. Carter dedicated himself to promoting human rights at home and abroad, but with limited success. As president, he struggled to end the economic and international woes of the era.

The failure of the U.S. government to solve its economic woes during the 1970s led to feelings of anger and hopelessness in Americans, contributing to an overwhelming sense of malaise throughout the decade. Americans lost faith in the government to aid them in their time of need and began to question what role the government should have in their lives, if any at all. The failures of democratic President Jimmy Carter at the end of the decade pushed the “silent majority” of Americans to speak up again in the election of 1980, ushering in another era of conservatism with the election of Ronald Reagan.

Unit 5 Learning Goals

Essential Question

If you are successful in this unit, your scholars will be able to answer the Unit 5 Essential Question: *To what extent were the 1970s a decade of malaise?*

Big Ideas

The Big Ideas, outlined below, help answer the Unit 5 Essential Question and reflect the key ideas scholars must master by the end of this unit. As you teach Unit 5, connect every lesson back to the Big Idea(s) that the lesson helps illustrate. The Unit 5 Big Ideas were adapted from the UCLA National History Standards United States Era 10 and from the New York State Common Core Social Studies 9–12 Framework.

- **Big Idea 1: Nixon, Ford, and Carter all failed to effectively address the social upheaval and economic downturn of the 1970s, which resulted in an increased distrust of the government’s ability to meet the needs of the American people.**
 - The year 1968 ushered in an era of conservatism in the United States, with the election of Richard Nixon. Nixon appealed to the “silent majority” of Americans who were looking for peace and stability amidst the perceived violence and chaos of the 1960s, and he attempted to attain this by implementing a campaign of law and order.
 - In an effort to restore law and order in the United States, Richard Nixon implemented policies to combat drug use and abuse by severely punishing distributors and users of narcotics. This “War on Drugs” disproportionately affected minority communities and is often described as a war on the poor, as low-income urban areas were most often the targets of these harsh drug policies.
 - Nixon’s involvement in the cover-up of his administration’s participation in the Watergate scandal and his subsequent resignation led Americans to begin to lose faith in the U.S. government.
 - An economic recession and an oil embargo placed on the United States by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) at the beginning of the 1970s led to a period of economic woe for Americans, known as stagflation. Despite Nixon, Ford, and Carter’s efforts to reboot the economy, stagflation continued, leading to a generalized period of discontent and the loss of many American jobs.

- **Big Idea 2: Whereas some foreign policy initiatives in the 1970s eased international tensions, others sparked economic crises for many Americans.**
 - The 1970s was a major turning point for the Cold War, as Nixon finally withdrew all troops from Vietnam. Nixon also opened diplomatic relations with Communist China and established a period of détente with the Soviet Union.
 - President Ford continued to promote Nixon’s détente but struggled when Saigon fell to North Vietnam, marking the loss of the Vietnam War.
 - President Carter attempted to promote human rights, mediating peace talks with Israel and Egypt and restoring rights over the Panama Canal to the Panamanians.
 - The Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979 put a damper on Carter’s foreign policy successes, leading many to doubt his ability to be a strong leader in the face of international crises.

- **Big Idea 3: The social movements of the 1960s, as well as the emergence of new movements, attempted to shape government policies in the 1970s.**
 - In some ways, the 1970s were a continuation of the 1960s: women, African Americans, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, and other marginalized groups of people continued their fight for equality, and many Americans joined the protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam.
 - Environmentalism was a chief concern of many Americans and was reflected in domestic policies of the 1970s.
 - In response to the ongoing protest movements for equality, a “New Right” mobilized in defense of political conservatism and traditional family roles.

Key Terms

The following people, places, and events are foundational to understanding the Big Ideas of this unit. As these words are introduced in each lesson, add them to your word wall and hold scholars accountable for using them in discussion and writing throughout the unit.

- Malaise
- Conservatism
- Richard Nixon
- War on Drugs
- The Watergate Scandal
- OPEC
- Stagflation
- Oil Embargo
- Détente
- Vietnamization
- Camp David Peace Accords
- Helsinki Accords
- Iran Hostage Crisis
- Chicano Movement
- Environmentalism
- American Indian Movement
- The New Right
- Boston Busing Crisis
- Jimmy Carter
- Crisis of Confidence Speech

Intellectual Preparation

Class Materials Once you have internalized the Big Ideas of the unit, to be successful, you must study all scholar documents and materials before you teach the first lesson:

- All documents in the [Unit 5 Sourcebook](#)
- All scholar and teacher materials in the [Unit 5 Workbook](#)

Additional Resources The resources below provide additional historical background for the content covered in Unit 5:

- Read the essays “The 1970s” on the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History website; “Richard Nixon,” “Gerald Ford,” and “Jimmy Carter” all on the History Channel website.
- Browse [Khan Academy’s “1970s.”](#)
- Watch [Crash Course History: The Rise of Conservatism](#) and [Crash Course History: Ford, Carter, and Economic Malaise](#) on YouTube.

*To access more free American History content and resources, create an account on the Gilder Lehrman Institute website.

Unit 5 Lesson Sequence

Essential Question: To what extent were the 1970s a decade of malaise?

The first six lessons provide the context for why many Americans felt a sense of malaise at the end of the 1960s and throughout most of the 1970s. The first lesson revisits 1968, this time through the election and how the rise of conservatism in response to the chaos and disorder of the 1960s led to Richard Nixon becoming president. The second lesson gives scholars an understanding of the consequences of Richard Nixon’s law and order platform, executed through the War on Drugs, which disproportionately affected poor and minority communities. Lessons 3 through 5 address Richard Nixon’s major presidential scandal through his participation and cover-up of the Watergate affair, which led to his resignation and caused many Americans to begin to lose hope in the U.S. government’s ability to be fair and honest. The sixth lesson introduces scholars to the American economy and the concept of stagflation; the primary reason for Americans’ malaise during the 1970s. By the end of these six lessons, scholars should have a solid understanding of why Americans felt a malaise during the 1970s.

Lesson 1: 1968 Election (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How did the rise of conservatism influence the outcome of the 1968 election?

Lesson 2: The War on Drugs (Video Analysis)

- **Central Question:** Why did the United States wage a war on drugs in the 1970s?

Lessons 3–5: The Watergate Scandal (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** Should Congress have impeached President Nixon?

Lesson 6: The American Economy in the 1970s (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How did stagflation and the oil crisis of the 1970s affect Americans?

Lesson 7 introduces scholars to the foreign policy of all three presidents of the 1970s. Through this lesson, they will be introduced to policies that benefited the United States, such as a cooldown of the Cold War through détente and the end of the Vietnam War. Scholars will also see foreign policy decisions that caused a deeper malaise, such as the Iran Hostage Crisis at the end of the decade. By the end of this lesson, scholars will be able to articulate how foreign policy of the 1970s was mostly positive and helped ease some of the malaise felt by many Americans during the 1970s.

Lesson 7: Foreign Policy (Jigsaw)

- **Central Question:** To what extent was presidential foreign policy successful in the 1970s?

Lesson 8 introduces scholars to the many movements of the 1970s, most of which were continuations of previous movements that began in the 1960s. By the end of the lesson, scholars will understand that although many Americans were protesting for equal rights, the government was not necessarily amenable to granting equal rights through legislation, exacerbating many Americans' sense of malaise during the 1970s.

Lesson 8: Social Movements of the 1970s (Jigsaw)

- **Central Question:** To what extent were social movements of the 1970s successful?

The last three lessons revisit all three Big Ideas of the unit through the presidency of Jimmy Carter. Through this DBQ, scholars will understand that Jimmy Carter did not get reelected because he did not restore hope and faith in a beleaguered American public; he could not solve the domestic economic issues and he exacerbated foreign fears through the renewed oil embargo and the Iran Hostage Crisis. By the end of these three lessons, scholars will understand that despite any foreign policy or domestic legislation wins, by the end of the 1970s the American public had lost faith in the U.S. government to solve its problems, leading to another rise of conservatism.

Lessons 9–11: Jimmy Carter and the Crisis of Confidence (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** Why didn't President Carter get reelected in 1980?