

Year 3:

Unit 6

"The Era of Big Government is Over" - The 1980s and 1990s (1980 - 2000): Introduction

Unit Purpose: Why This Unit?

By the end of the 1970s, Americans were looking for a change. Overwhelmed with feelings of economic malaise and distrust in the government's honesty and ability to solve the country's problems, Americans wanted new leadership that could return hope and optimism to them. Due to these feelings of mistrust, and the general lack of hope and optimism that Carter instilled in the American people, the 1980 election became widely known as the ABC election — "Anyone But Carter."

In the election of 1980, Republican California governor Ronald Reagan decisively defeated Democrat President Carter and implemented his controversial "Reagan Revolution," which ushered in an era of conservatism and economic change in the United States. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, American society was shifting. The computer revolution changed how Americans lived, the workforce evolved from manufacturing to service industries and grew to incorporate women and new immigrants, and the AIDS epidemic challenged the notion of American progress. During the presidency of Reagan's successor, former Vice President George H.W. Bush, the Soviet Union collapsed, ending the Cold War. Democrat Bill Clinton defeated President Bush in 1992, continuing the economic prosperity of the Reagan era while also witnessing an increase in mass incarceration, income inequality, and congressional partisanship, the last of which resulted in Clinton's impeachment trial.

The 1980s and 1990s changed the role of the government in Americans' lives. After the malaise of the 1970s, Americans' distrust in the government began to grow. Reagan capitalized on this distrust and declared, "Government is not the solution to the problem. The government is the problem." This concept ultimately bled across party lines, and in the 1990s, Democratic President Bill Clinton declared, "The era of big government is over," winning him massive support across the country. The debate about the role of the government in Americans' lives that largely began during this time period still lingers today, as both parties engage in a tug of war — does the government create and maintain social programs in an effort to

reduce poverty and inequality, or does this mean the government has too much power over citizens' lives?

Unit 6 Learning Goals

Essential Question

If you are successful in this unit, your scholars will be able to answer the Unit 6 Essential Question: *How did the nature of American government and politics change in the 1980s and 1990s?*

Big Ideas

The Big Ideas, outlined below, help answer the Unit 6 Essential Question and reflect the key ideas that scholars must master by the end of this unit. As you teach Unit 6, connect every lesson back to the Big Idea(s) that the lesson helps illustrate. The Unit 6 Big Ideas were adapted from the UCLA National History Standards United States Era 10 and the New York State Common Core Social Studies 9–12 Framework.

- **Big Idea 1: Domestic policies became more conservative during the 1980s and 1990s, reducing government influence in social issues.**
 - Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 ushered in an era of conservatism, and through the "Reagan Revolution" reduced the government's role in Americans' lives through economic programs, to the detriment of poor and minority citizens.
 - The election of 1980 saw a rise in the Christian evangelical movement, which solidified churches' connections to the government and influenced conservative politicians to appeal to morality and family stability in their campaigns.
 - The connection between the government and religion after the election of 1980 influenced the government's response to the AIDS epidemic, which was initially to ignore the issue and then to target informational campaigns to middle- and upper-income Americans, rather than the populations it harmed the most: poor and minority Americans.
- **Big Idea 2: Major foreign policy initiatives focused on promoting American power and influence during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union.**
 - Initially, Reagan attempted to assert American military power and rebuild American prestige through a tough stance against the Soviet Union, effectively breaking the long period of détente established in the 1970s.
 - Over the course of the 1980s, Reagan sought to establish an end to the Cold War through more peaceful means after the threat of nuclear war became more realistic.
 - Mikhail Gorbachev's more democratic leadership of the Soviet Union ultimately led to its collapse, after long-held communist territories declared their independence as sovereign nations in a domino effect.
 - After the end of the Cold War, the United States sought to take a more powerful leadership role as the only remaining superpower, asserting itself in disputes around the world, such as in the Middle East with the Gulf War.

- **Big Idea 3: American industry shifted in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of changing demographics and technological innovations in the workforce.**
 - There was a sharp increase in the labor force due to the participation of women and the influx of new immigrants during the 1980s and 1990s, contributing to the change in family dynamics during this time period.
 - The shift of the labor force from manufacturing to service industries reduced job opportunities in rural areas and created an influx of job opportunities in urban areas.
 - This shift in the labor force also created a skill gap, increasing the need for higher education for the new highly skilled needs in the service industry.
 - Scientific advances and the computer revolution also contributed to the shift of the labor force, as companies moved to more technologically developed platforms that required skilled use of computers.
- **Big Idea 4: Economic policies generally favored the rich and corporations, widening the gap between rich and poor in contemporary society.**
 - Reagan’s economic plan, called “Reaganomics,” focused on cutting government spending and reducing tax rates on the wealthy, beginning the decades-long widening of the income gap.
 - The income gap widened during Clinton’s presidency through social program reforms he implemented, such as tough-on-crime initiatives and welfare reform, all of which disproportionately affected poor and minority Americans.

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.

- Revolutionary
- Ronald Reagan
- Supply-side economics/“Reaganomics”
- New Right
- Moral Majority
- AIDS epidemic
- Mikhail Gorbachev
- Berlin Wall
- George H.W. Bush
- New World Order
- Gulf War
- Saddam Hussein
- Computer revolution
- Immigration
- Women in the workforce
- Service industry
- Bill Clinton

- Welfare reform
 - Impeachment
 - Income inequality
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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 6 Sourcebook](#)
- All scholar and teacher materials in the [Unit 6 Workbook](#)

Additional Resources The resources below provide additional historical background for the content covered in Unit 6:

- Read the essay “The Age of Reagan” on the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History* website.
- Browse the “End of the 20th Century” webpage on the University of Houston’s Digital History website.
- Watch the videos “Crash Course History: The Reagan Revolution” and “Crash Course History: The Clinton Years” on YouTube.

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

Unit 6 Lesson Sequence

Essential Question: How did the nature of American government and politics change in the 1980s and 1990s?

The first three lessons introduce scholars to the idea of how the rise of conservatism in the 1980s led to a reduced role for the government in Americans’ lives. In the first and second lessons, scholars will grapple with whether Reagan’s presidency was revolutionary, as the connection between the Christian evangelical movement and the government solidified and the reduction of the government’s influence over Americans’ economic lives lead to negative effects for poor and minority Americans. In the third lesson, scholars will learn about the AIDS epidemic and evaluate what it means for the government to respond adequately. By the end of these three lessons, scholars will understand how the conflation of religion and politics leads to the government’s reduced role in addressing social issues.

Lessons 1–2: The Reagan Revolution (Jigsaw, Debate)

- **Central Question:** To what extent was Ronald Reagan’s presidency revolutionary?

Lesson 3: The AIDS Epidemic (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** To what extent did the government adequately address the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s?

Lessons 4 and 5 introduce scholars to the changing role of the United States in the world. In Lesson 4, scholars will learn about the changing role of the United States in the Cold War conflict, first more strongheaded in an effort to assert American power and influence after the period of détente, then more amenable to compromise by the end of the 1980s. Scholars will learn, however, that the Soviet Union's collapse was largely because of Mikhail Gorbachev's more democratic leadership, rather than due to U.S. actions. In Lesson 5, scholars will explore the U.S. role in the world after the Soviet Union's collapse, as the only world superpower expanding its influence around the globe, specifically in the Middle East and the Gulf War. By the end of these two lessons, scholars will understand that U.S. foreign policy aimed to exert American power and influence abroad during the 1980s and 1990s.

Lesson 4: The Fall of the Soviet Union (Video Analysis)

- **Central Question:** Why did the Soviet Union collapse?

Lesson 5: The Gulf War (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** Why did the United States get involved in the Gulf War?

Lesson 6 introduces scholars to the changes affecting the American workforce during the 1980s and 1990s, especially the invention of the personal computer. By the end of this lesson, scholars will understand the many reasons that the workforce evolved during the 1980s and 1990s, including an influx of immigrants and female workers, as well as a transition from manufacturing to service industries.

Lesson 6: The Evolution of the American Workforce (Jigsaw)

- **Central Question:** Why did the American workforce evolve in the 1980s and 1990s?

Lessons 7 through 9 introduce scholars to how government policies enacted during the 1980s and 1990s affected Americans across the United States. Throughout these lessons, scholars will evaluate Clinton's presidency and whether or not it was a time of national prosperity through the DBQ. By the end of these lessons, scholars will understand that while policies enacted during Clinton's presidency reflected increased prosperity for middle- and upper-class Americans, these same policies exacerbated the income gap and detrimentally affected poor and minority Americans.

Lessons 7–9: The Clinton Presidency (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** To what extent was Clinton's presidency a time of national prosperity?