**Modern Issues (1970-Present)**

**Part I: Nixon and Foreign Policy**

Before President Richard Nixon was forced to resign in the wake of covering up the break-in at Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters in the Watergate Building, he was making quite a bit of positive headway in reducing Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union and China. Much like all of Johnson’s gains domestically (the Great Society) taking a backseat to the debacle in Vietnam, Nixon’s foreign policy gains get lost in the shadow of Watergate.

**Realpolitik and Detente**

As we covered last unit, Nixon subscribed to a theory called **détente**, that if we could become friendly with China and the Soviet Union then they would be less willing to support North Vietnam in the war and may, in fact, encourage the North to give up its goal of capturing the South. (Didn’t work, obviously). But to put détente into action required a shift in thinking of how we determine our allies. So Nixon shifted his thinking to **realpolitik.** Before this, our foreign relations with countries depended on their politics (commie or anti-commie) and kept us from relations with communist nations. Realpolitik was about how much power another country had and if they could somehow benefit the U.S. politically or economically. Basically, if you were a powerful country and being friends with you would somehow benefit us, we’d deal with you. If you weren’t, we didn’t really care.

**Checkpoint Question:** How would that have changed our involvement in Vietnam? Does the U.S. government go by realpolitik today? Give an example.

**Nixon targets China**

By 1972, there were 5 superpowers in the world divided into two camps: free (U.S., Japan, European Economic Community) and Communist (China and Soviet Union). Nixon knew he couldn’t go straight to the Soviet Union through détente and realpolitik because then they (and probably his critics in the U.S.) would see him as weak and crawling to the Soviets for peace. So he had to find a way to get the USSR to come to us. So China became the perfect pawn to try to make the Soviets jealous, and a little worried. Starting in 1969, Chinese-Soviet relations started to get a little rocky. China was pursuing a modified version of communism that included dealing with outside economies and even a limited amount of privatization of industry and agricultural within the country. The USSR was not impressed and so the two started to develop a rift.

Nixon decided to take advantage of this to bring he Soviets to the table as well as try to help end the Vietnam war. China was, after all, the biggest supporter of North Vietnam in the war, being their immediate neighbor and all. So Nixon made the move through **Ping Pong Diplomacy** in 1971. Our first attempt at better relations was when we went the U.S. ping pong team to China to play good-will exhibition matches (see Forest Gump). That ended with us restarting trade with China, which had ended in 1949 when commies took over.

Then in 1972, Nixon visited, becoming the first U.S. president to visit China, or any communist nation. It really calmed down Cold War fears with China. As part of that trip, we recognized communist China as a nation for the first time, setting the stage for even more trade and economic opportunity. Plus, it made USSR worried that we were becoming close and they didn’t like that. They could benefit from good relations with us, so they got a little worried and extended invite to Nixon to visit Moscow.

**Nixon goes to Moscow**

The gamble worked – the Soviets came calling for Nixon to visit Moscow. The USSR was starting to hurt economically and needed some of the benefits China was enjoying from its agreements with the U.S. In May 1972, Nixon became the first U.S. president to visit the USSR. They wanted to slow our alliance with China, slow down the costly arms race that was taking up a ton of their spending and get access to U.S. grain (have to feed the poor people somehow).

While there, the two nations agreed to a nuclear arms treaty called **SALT I**. It limited the number of nuclear weapons both sides could produce, but only a specific type of weapon, which wasn’t in large production anyways. It was more of a symbolic treaty than one that really did anything because we kept building our main type of nuclear missile that carries 10 warheads, which had massive destructive power.

**Part II: The Carter Years (1977-80)**

Nixon was followed in the presidency by Gerald Ford, his vice president, when he resigned. Ford served the last three years of Nixon’s term to little result. He had pardoned Nixon for any crimes he may have committed and the American people were ready for a change in 1976 when they elected Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter, a former peanut farmer-turned politician from Georgia. Carter wasted little time undoing all the work Nixon put into easing Cold War tensions when he dumped realpolitik and adopted a foreign policy based on nations’ track records on human rights.

Human rights means treating their people with respect. If you didn’t, we weren’t going to be friends with you. This strained relations with USSR and China, both of which were harsh dictatorships that squashed opposition among their citizens very quickly.

Carter also was the president who, in 1978, agreed to give away control of the Panama Canal in the year 1999. This action did improve Latin American relations because it was a sign that we weren’t going to control smaller countries quite so much as we had in past. In reality, Carter’s approach was more in line with traditional American values. However, for the global climate of politics and economics, it was a major step back for the health of the U.S.

**Middle East Relations: Gains and big losses**

Carter’s biggest win was mediating a peaceful resolution to a long-time hatred between Israel and Egypt in the summer of 1978. Israel had gained control of the Sinai Peninsula in the Yom Kippur War during 1960s. The peninsula (see map) had been part of Egypt since the time of the Pharoahs. Egypt wanted it back and war was brewing. Carter invited leaders of both countries to meet with him at Camp David (the presidential retreat in Maryland) and worked out an agreement known as the **Camp David Accords**. In the agreement, Israel would vacate the peninsula, Egypt would officially recognize Israel as a nation and both sides would avoid a war that could have started World War III.

Carter couldn’t gloat long though, because he ran into the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979. That year, Iran went through and Islamic revolution and the previous leader, supported by the U.S., known as the Shah was deposed (overthrown). In the place of the Shah, a government run by the principles of Sharia Law (Islamic law) was instituted and rejected all things Western (related to European nations/United States).

During the revolution, Iranian college students in the capital of Tehran managed to overwhelm the defenses at the United States embassy and took 52 Americans hostage, demanding the return of the Shah to answer for crimes they say he committed against the people of Iran. There is no doubt the Shah was a bad dude (he spent tons of money flying his meals in from Paris and his wife took baths in milk) but he was OUR bad dude. He was anti-commie and sold us oil cheap, so we liked him despite how he treated his people (even Carter was OK with him because $$ means more than human rights). When the Shah was overthrown, we allowed him to come to U.S. for “cancer treatment”. Iranians demanded he be returned to face trial and execution. We said no. That’s when the crap then hit the fan and the embassy was overrun.

The hostages were finally released in January 1981, just days after Ronald Reagan took the oath of office after having demolished Carter in the 1980 presidential election.

**The Energy Crisis**

Perhaps more than anything, Carter was sunk by the ongoing energy crisis of the 1970s. **OPEC** had raised oil (and thus gasoline) prices since the 1960s as punishment for supporting Israel in the Yom Kippur and Six Days wars. They quadrupled the price in 1974 on President Ford. Carter had little luck convince OPEC to ramp up production which would have increased supply and dropped prices. And when Iran’s revolution happened and our cheap oil dried up there, things just got worse. On top of that, Carter refused to authorize increased oil production in the U.S. (Texas and Alaska) due to the environmental lobbyists saying it would ruin the environment. Instead, Carter encouraged the American people to cut oil consumption. (Yeah, that sounds like something Americans would LOVE to do, doesn’t it?)

**Part III: Reagan, Bush Sr. and**

**the End of the Cold War**

The 1980s were a decade of crazy times: cocaine cowboys running wild in Florida, Michael Jackson was making hit records instead of creepy headlines, big hair was huge and New Kids on the Block was actually new. But it also saw a former movie star elected president and saw him, and his successor, bring an end to the Cold War and the beginning of our real troubles in the Middle East.

**Star Wars (aka Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI)**

This was President Ronald Reagan’s big military thing. We started research and planning on it, but it turned out not be feasible to actually institute it (monetarily and technologically). The plan called for a space-based missile defense system that would have cost TRILLIONS of dollars to build. It was supposed to work on a complex system of space-based missiles and lasers in coordination with ground-based missiles and lasers (yes, lasers) to effectively form a shield over North America. It was too ambitious for our technological know-how at the time, and certainly for our budget.

But the Soviets found out about it, thought it was going to happen, and started spending money like crazy to improve their defenses, which would lead to HUGE economic problems for them, which would greatly contribute to the collapse of communism.

**Bringing down the Soviet Union**

Reagan took a very hardline stance on the Soviet Union, somewhat reminiscent of Eisenhower’s approach (IKE!!!!). Again, this caused the USSR to pour money they didn’t have into their military, practically bankrupting the nation. Into this mess stepped a new leader by the name of Mikhail Gorbachev, who for seemingly the first time since Kruschev (Cuban Missile Crisis leader of USSR) was a realist and not a macho egomaniac. He instituted two revolutionary ideas for the Soviet Union: **glasnost** and **perestroika.**

Glasnost was Gorbachev’s allowance of open criticism of the Soviet government and a move toward free press. This was a huge deal because before, anyone who criticized the government ended up in prison or dead. Perestroika was a plan to move from a communist economy (where the government controls everything) to more free enterprise (like we have, where business is owned privately and government doesn’t control it) as well as moving toward a democratic government instead of a dictatorship.

**Satellite Nations are cast off**

Ultimately, in addition to military spending putting a crush on Soviet economics, the satellite nations were straining the USSR economy. The USSR had been financially supporting them since they rejected the Marshall Plan in the late 1940s. Remember, Communism is not a growth economy, so smaller countries have trouble supporting themselves.

As a result of the financial burden of satellite nations, Gorbachev told them to go on their own, change to free enterprise and democracy and stop being a rock pulling the USSR economy into the crapper.

In greatest sign of collapse of communism in Europe, East Germany goes democratic and opens border crossings between East and West Berlin. On Nov. 9, 1989 the gates of the Berlin Wall are opened and the people of Berlin literally start tearing down the wall. Other than 9/11, it was the most important world event in the past 40 years. In October of 1990, West and East Germany officially reunite as one nation, the first time since Nazi Germany surrendered in 1945 that there existed a unified Germany.

**Soviet Union collapses, Cold War won**

In December of 1991, the Soviet Union, formed in 1917 during World War I, ceased to exist. Fourteen Soviet states declare their independence from the USSR, nations we know today like Ukraine, Georgia (no, not the state!) Belarus, Lithuania and Kazakstan, become free. The original Russia (of the Czars) remains, but is no longer a communist worker’s paradise, but a chaotic wild, wild West of free market economics after three-quarters of a century of communist “equality.”

**The Gulf War (Iraq war, Version 1.0)**

You probably all know we went to war in Iraq following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, led by President George W. Bush. What you may not know is that was our second trip to Iraq to fight Saddam Hussein in a 10-year time span.

In 1991, Hussein led an invasion of tiny, oil-rich neighbor Kuwait. We got a lot of our oil from Kuwait at a very reasonable price, so George H.W. Bush (W’s daddy) sent American forces in to free Kuwait and expel Saddam back across his border. The U.S. spent five weeks of sustained bombing of Iraqi military targets in both Kuwait and Iraq before sending in ground troops. It took just 100 hours (or a little more than 4 days) of that ground operation before Saddam asks for peace and we agree. That was our mistake though, as we allowed him to remain in power and would come back a little more than 10 years later to finish the job. Only finishing the job took more than four years in the 2000s.

This established our ongoing intervention in Middle East affairs focused on oil.

**Part IV: Terror, Trade and Immigration**

National security, global economics and immigration are three of the biggest issues facing the United States today. All of them directly affect how you are able to live your life at this moment.

**War on Terror**

Everyone knows about Sept. 11, 2001, and the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon by al-Qaeda jihadists. But what you may not realize is that those were not the first terror attacks on U.S. soil. In 1993, Islamic terrorists detonated a van full of explosives in the basement parking garage of the World Trade Center in an attempt to bring down one of the towers. They were unsuccessful.

But in 1995, and homegrown, non-Muslim terrorist by the name of Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck-bomb in front of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, causing nearly half of the 9-story tall structure to collapse, killing 168 people, including children in a daycare center on the first floor. McVeigh was an anti-government militant who thought the U.S. government had too much control over the lives of Americans. It was the worst domestic terrorist attack until the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

On Tuesday morning, Sept. 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists executed the plan designed by Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda. The terrorists hijacked four cross-country flights originating on the East Coast of the United States. Two of the plans were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. One plane was crashed into the Pentagon, just outside Washington, D.C. The Pentagon is the headquarters of the United States military. The fourth plane, bound for another target in Washington, D.C., crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside. No one knows for sure why, but there is evidence that the passenger of that plane, having been told via cell phone the fate of the other planes, attempted to take back control of the plane, leading to its crash.

The result of these attacks was what we now call America’s **War on Terror** and has led the United States to wage war in the Middle East for the past 14 years. In Afghanistan, American soldiers were sent to fight the Taliban, a militant Islamic group known to support al-Qaeda, and to hunt down and capture/kill the al-Qaeda leadership that was believed to be hiding the mountains in the rugged Northwest border area shared with Pakistan. In May 2011, Navy SEAL Team Six successfully launched a raid on a compound in Pakistan, killing Osama bin Laden. However, troops remain in Afghanistan to aid that country’s government’s fight to hold Islamic extremist groups at bay from toppling the government and creating a nation that will harbor and train terrorist groups.

At the same time, the U.S. returned to Iraq under the command of President George W. Bush to oust Saddam Hussein. The reasoning given was that Hussein had **Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs)** that he could possible supply to terrorist groups. Hussein was captured, tried by an Iraqi court for crimes against his people, most notably mass killings of those who opposed him, and executed.

Still, the war on terror continues to this day and American troops remain in the Middle East fight extremists.

**Trade and Globalization**

The 1990s was a decade of great economic growth in the United States. President Bill Clinton’s administration pursued policies that held the belief that trade is the key to both U.S. and global economic stability.

One of the most controversial parts of Clinton’s plan was the **North American Free Trade Agreement,** or **NAFTA**. In the agreement, the United States, Canada and Mexico agreed to remove most of the trade barriers between the three nations, including tariffs (taxes on imported goods). Those who supported the agreement saw this as a way to strengthen our economy and create U.S. jobs by making our goods more affordable to our neighbors. Critics said it would allow U.S. companies to move their factories, and jobs, to Mexico without penalty, where they could pay a much lower wage to workers.

In the end, economists have agreed that NAFTA had very little impact on the economies of the three countries, with Canada benefitting the most and Mexico the least, but none of the three nations seeing dramatic improvement.

**Immigration Rises Again**

Throughout the year we have talked about the different responses to major waves of immigration, starting in the 1880s and 1890s and again in the 1920s. One thing each of these eras of major immigration have in common is the rise of **nativism**. The 2000s have been no different in that aspect, and immigration and immigration reform, continue to be important political and social issues even in 2015.

The major difference with immigration today is where the immigrants are coming from. In the pre-1900s and 1920s, immigration was mainly from Europe, with some Asian (except Chinese, of course. Remember the Chinese Exclusion Act?) But since 1960, 50% of immigrants are coming from Latin America and 30% from Asia (China, Japan, Korea, former South Vietnam, mainly).

Immigrants are still coming to America for the economic opportunities this country provides – jobs. That does not sit well with many nativists, who believe they are stealing American jobs.

Latin American immigration has been so large that in some places, we have **majority-minority states**, or places where minority groups account for a majority of the population, like California, New Mexico and Hawaii.

Illegal immigration, especially from Mexico and other Latin American nations, is a big issue for the United States. Statistics show that in 2009, the number of illegals in the country exceeded 11 million, and has only grown since.

While the federal government continues to grapple with the illegal immigration issue, California passed a law, **Proposition 187**, in 1994 to try to discourage illegals from crossing the border just south of San Diego. The law cut all education and non-emergency health benefits to any immigrants who could not prove they were here legally. Many illegals come to the United States knowing that their children will be given free education, and that free healthcare clinics offer basic medical care, without questioning legal status. Prop 187 tried to do away with that.

However, Prop 187 was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1998, saying states had no right according to the Constitution to pass immigration laws, that only the federal government had that power. Further, the Supreme Court said the law violated a person’s 14th Amendment right to due legal process because it allowed for expulsion from the United States back to Mexico without a hearing.

Yet states continue to pass laws limiting immigration and the rights of immigrants in an effort to stem the tide of illegals into the United States. As we have seen throughout this course, immigration is an issue that isn’t likely to be resolved in the near future.