

Chapter 29: The Search for Order in an Era of Limits, 1973-1980

I. An Era of Limits

A. Energy Crisis

1. Once the world's leading producer, the United States had become heavily dependent on imported oil, mostly from the Persian Gulf.
2. When Middle Eastern states threw off the remnants of European colonialism, they demanded concessions for access to the fields. In 1960 oil-rich developing countries formed a cartel, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).
3. Conflict between Israel and the neighboring Arab states of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan politicized OPEC between 1967 and 1973. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt and Syria invaded Israel to regain territory lost in the 1967 conflict. Israel prevailed, but only after being resupplied by an emergency American airlift.
4. Resentful of American support for Israel, the Arab states in OPEC declared an oil embargo in October 1973.
5. The United States scrambled to meet its energy needs in the face of the oil shortage. Congress imposed a national speed limit of 55 miles an hour to conserve fuel and Americans began to buy smaller, more fuel-efficient foreign cars.
6. Sales of American cars slumped. With one of every six jobs in the country generated directly or indirectly by the auto industry, the effects rippled across the economy.
7. Compounding the distress was the raging inflation set off by the oil shortage; prices rose by nearly 20 percent in 1974 alone.

B. Environmentalism

1. The energy crisis drove home the realization that the earth's resources were not limitless.
2. The environmental movement was an offshoot of sixties activism, but it had numerous historical precedents. The movement had received a hefty push back in 1962 when biologist Rachael Carson published *Silent Spring*, a stunning analysis of the impact of the pesticide DDT on the food chain.
3. In 1970, on the heels of the Santa Barbara oil spill, Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act, which created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
4. A spate of new laws followed: the Clean Air Act (1970), Occupational Health and Safety Act (1970), Water Pollution Control Act (1972), and Endangered Species Act (1973).
5. Corporations resented environmental regulations, as did many of their workers, who believed that tightened standards threatened their jobs. By the 1980s, environmentalism starkly divided Americans.
6. By 1974, utility companies were operating forty-two nuclear power plants, with a hundred more planned. Environmentalists, however, publicized other dangers of nuclear power: a meltdown would be catastrophic, and so, in slow motion, might be radioactive wastes.
7. These fears seemed to be confirmed in March 1979, when the reactor core at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, came close to meltdown. This near-catastrophe enabled environmentalists to win the battle over nuclear energy.
8. After Three Mile Island, no new nuclear plants were authorized. Today, nuclear reactors account for 20 percent of all U.S. power generation – substantially less than several European nations, but still fourth in the world.

C. Economic Transformation

1. In addition to the energy crisis, the economy was beset by a host of longer-term problems. Government spending on the Vietnam War and the Great Society made for a growing federal deficit and spiraling inflation. In the industrial sector, the country faced more robust competition from West Germany and Japan. America's share of world trade dropped from 32 percent in 1955 to 18 percent in 1970 and was headed downward.
2. Many of these economic woes highlighted a transformation in the United States: from an industrial-manufacturing economy to a postindustrial-service one.
3. In the short run, the economy was hit by a devastating combination of unemployment and inflation – *stagflation*.
4. For ordinary Americans, the reality of stagflation was a noticeable decline in their standard of living. None of the three presidents of the decade – Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter – had much luck tackling stagflation.

5. Nixon's New Economic Policy imposed temporary price and wage controls in 1971 in an effort to curb inflation. He removed the United States from the gold standard, allowing the dollar to float in international currency markets. The underlying weaknesses in the U.S. economy remained, however.
6. Ford's "Whip Inflation Now" (WIN) campaign urged Americans to cut food waste and to do more with less but was deeply unpopular.
7. Carter's policies would be similarly ineffective.
8. America's economic woes struck hardest at the industrial sector, which began to be dismantled. Worst hit was the steel industry, as foreign steel flooded into the United States during the 1970s.
9. The steel industry was the prime example of what became known as **deindustrialization**. The country was in the throes of an economic transformation that left it largely stripped of its industrial base. Deindustrialization threw many blue-collar workers out of well-paid union jobs.
10. Deindustrialization dealt an especially harsh blow to the labor movement, which had facilitated the postwar expansion of that middle class.
11. Instead of seeking higher wages, unions now mainly fought to save jobs. Union membership went into steep decline. With labor's decline, a main buttress of the New Deal coalition was coming undone.
12. Middle-class flight to the suburbs continued apace, and the "urban crisis" of the 1960s spilled into the "era of limits." Facing huge price inflation and mounting piles of debt – to finance social services for the poor and to replace disappearing tax revenue – nearly every major American city struggled to pay its bills in the 1970s.
13. Cities faced declining fortunes in these years for many reasons, but one key was the continued loss of residents and businesses to nearby suburbs.
14. Suburbanization and the economic crisis combined powerfully in what became known as the "tax revolt," a dramatic reversal of the postwar spirit of generous public investment. The premier example was California's Proposition 13, an initiative that would roll back property taxes, cap future increases for present owners, and require that all tax measures have a two-thirds majority in the legislature.
15. Proposition 13 hobbled public spending in the nation's most populous state, inspired tax revolts across the country, and helped conservatives define an enduring issue: low taxes.

D. Politics in Flux, 1974–1980

1. A search for order characterized national politics in the 1970s as well. Liberals were in retreat, but conservatives had not yet put forth a clear alternative.
2. Seventy-five new Democratic members of the House came to Washington after the 1974 midterm elections, in which they made Watergate and Ford's pardon of Nixon their top issues.
3. Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress eliminated the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and reduced the number of votes needed to end a filibuster from 67 to 60. Democrats dismantled the existing committee structure, which had entrenched power in the hands of a few elite committee chairs, and passed the Ethics in Government Act.
4. Ironically, the post-Watergate reforms made government *less* efficient and *more* susceptible to special interests – a diffuse power structure actually gave lobbyists more places to exert influence. Influence shifted to party leaders and with little incentive to compromise, the parties grew more rigid, and bi-partisanship became rare.
5. Despite Democratic gains in 1974, liberalism proved unable to stop run-away inflation or speed up economic growth. Conservatives in Congress used this opening to articulate alternatives, especially economic deregulation and tax cuts.
6. Deindustrialization in the Northeast and Midwest and continued population growth in the Sunbelt shifted power toward the West and South.
7. James E. Carter won the Democratic presidential nomination in 1976. Trading on Watergate and his down-home image, Carter pledged to restore morality to the White House. Carter defeated Ford with 50 percent of the popular vote.
8. But Carter's inexperience showed. Disdainful of the Democratic establishment, Carter relied heavily on inexperienced advisers from Georgia, leading to chilly relations with congressional leaders.
9. Carter was an economic conservative, and his efforts proved ineffective at reigniting economic growth. Then, the Iranian Revolution curtailed oil supplies, and gas prices jumped again. By then, Carter's approval rating had fallen below 30 percent.

II. Reform and Reaction in the 1970s

A. Civil Rights in a New Era

1. Among the most significant efforts to address the legacy of exclusion against minorities and women was affirmative action.
2. Affirmative action, however, did not sit well with many whites, who felt that the deck was being stacked against them. Much of the dissent came from conservative groups that had opposed civil rights all along. They charged affirmative action advocates with “reverse discrimination.”
3. A major shift in affirmative action policy came in 1978. Allan Bakke, a white man, sued the University of California at Davis Medical School for rejecting him in favor of less-qualified, minority-group candidates.
4. *Bakke v. University of California* upheld affirmative action but rejected a quota system, and thereby also called it into question. Future court rulings and state referenda in the 1990s and 2000s would further limit affirmative action.
5. Another major civil rights objective – desegregating schools – produced even more controversy and fireworks.
6. Where schools remained highly segregated, the courts endorsed the strategy of busing students to achieve integration. In some, black children rode busses from their neighborhoods to attend previously all-white schools. In others, white children were bused to black or Latino neighborhoods.
7. In the North, where segregated schooling arose from suburban residential patterns, busing orders proved less effective. Postwar suburbanization had produced in the North what law had mandated in the South – segregated schools.

B. The Women’s Movement and Gay Rights

1. Much of women’s liberation activism focused on the female body. The women’s health movement founded dozens of medical clinics, encouraged women to become physicians, and educated millions of women about their bodies.
2. To reform anti-abortion laws, activists pushed for remedies in more than thirty state legislatures. Women’s liberationists founded the antirape movement, established rape crisis centers around the nation, and lobbied state legislatures and Congress to reform rape laws.
3. Buoyed by this flourishing of activism, the women’s movement renewed the fight for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. Congress adopted the amendment in 1972 and within just two years, thirty-four of the necessary thirty-eight states had ratified it, and the ERA appeared headed for adoption.
4. Credit for putting the brakes on ERA ratification goes chiefly to a remarkable woman: Phyllis Schlafly, a lawyer long active in conservative causes. Despite her own flourishing career, Schlafly and her organization, STOP ERA, advocated traditional roles for women.
5. The women’s movement had another major goal: winning reproductive rights. Activists pursued two tracks: legislative and judicial. In the early 1960s, abortion was illegal in virtually every state. A decade later, a handful of states, such as New York, Hawaii, California, and Colorado, adopted laws making legal abortions easier to obtain.
6. The judicial track culminated in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). In that landmark decision, the justices nullified a Texas law that prohibited abortion under any circumstances, even when the woman’s health was at risk, and laid out a new national standard: abortions performed during the first trimester were protected by the right of privacy.
7. For the women’s movement, *Roe v. Wade* represented a triumph. For evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, Catholics, and conservatives generally, it was a bitter pill. *Roe* polarized what was already a sharply divided public and mobilized conservatives to seek a Supreme Court reversal limitation of abortion rights.
8. The gay rights movement had achieved notable victories as well. These, too, proved controversial. No one embodied the combination of gay liberation and hard-nosed politics better than a San Francisco camera-shop owner named Harvey Milk. Milk managed to mobilize the “gay vote” into a powerful bloc, and finally won a city supervisor seat in 1977. After he helped to win passage of a gay rights ordinance in San Francisco, he was assassinated – along with the city’s mayor, George Moscone – by a disgruntled former supervisor named Dan White.

C. The Supreme Court and the Rights Revolution

1. After *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the court increasingly agreed to hear human rights and civil liberties cases.
2. This shift was led by Earl Warren, appointed chief justice in 1953 by Eisenhower. The Warren Court lasted from 1954 until 1969 and established some of the most far-reaching liberal jurisprudence in U.S. history.

3. Right-wing activists detested the Warren Court, accusing its decisions of contributing to social breakdown and rising crime rates.
4. President Nixon came into the presidency promising to appoint conservative-minded justices to the bench. Between 1969 and 1972, he was able to appoint four new justices to the Supreme Court, including the new chief justice, Warren Burger. However, the Burger Court refused to scale back the liberal precedents set under Warren.
5. Other decisions advanced women's rights. In 1976, the Court ruled that arbitrary distinctions based on sex in the workplace and other arenas were unconstitutional, and in 1986 that sexual harassment violated the Civil Rights Act.
6. In all of their rulings on privacy rights, however, both the Warren and Burger Courts confined their decisions to heterosexuals. The justices were reluctant to move ahead of public attitudes toward homosexuality.

III. The American Family on Trial

A. Working Families in the Age of Deindustrialization

1. One of the most striking developments of the 1970s and 1980s was the relative stagnation of wages. Hardest hit were blue-collar and pink-collar workers and those without college degrees.
2. Between 1973 and the early 1990s, every major income group except the top 10 percent saw their real earnings (accounting for inflation) either remain the same or decline. Women streamed into the workforce and Americans were fast becoming dependent on the two-income household.
3. For a brief period in the 1970s, the trials of working men and women made a distinct imprint on national culture. Reporters wrote of the "blue-collar blues" associated with plant closings and the hard-fought strikes of the decade.
4. Across the nation, the number of union-led strikes surged, even as the number of Americans in the labor movement continued to decline. In most strikes and industrial conflict, workers won a measure of public attention but typically gained little economic ground.
5. When Americans turned on their televisions in the mid-1970s, the most popular shows reflected the "blue-collar blues" of struggling families. *All in the Family* was joined by *The Waltons*, set during the Great Depression. *Good Times*, *Welcome Back Kotter*, and *Sanford and Son* dealt with poverty in the inner city. *The Jeffersons* featured an upwardly mobile black couple. *Laverne and Shirley* focused on working girls in the 1950s and *One Day at a Time* on working women in the 1970s making do after divorce.
6. The most-watched television series of the decade, 1977's eight-part *Roots*, explored the history of slavery and the survival of African American culture and family "roots" despite the oppressive labor system. Not since the 1930s had American culture paid such close attention to working-class life.
7. The decade also saw the rise of musicians such as Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Paycheck, and John Cougar (Mellencamp), who became stars by turning the hard-scrabble lives of people in small towns and working-class communities into rock anthems that filled arenas. Meanwhile, on the streets of Harlem and the South Bronx in New York, working-class African American young men experimenting with dance and musical forms invented break dancing and rap music – styles that expressed both the hardship and the creativity of working-class black life in the deindustrialized American city.

B. Navigating the Sexual Revolution

1. By the 1960s, sex before marriage had grown more socially acceptable – an especially profound change for women – and frank discussions of sex in media and popular culture had grown more common.
2. In that decade, three developments dramatically accelerated this process: the introduction of the birth control pill, the rise of the baby-boomer-led counterculture, and the influence of feminism. Widely available in the United States for the first time in 1960, the birth control pill gave women an unprecedented degree of control over reproduction.
3. Women's rights activists reacted to the new emphasis on sexual freedom in at least two distinct ways.
4. For many feminists, the emphasis on casual sex seemed to perpetuate male privilege. They argued that while men could now freely explore numerous sexual relationships without social sanction, women remained trapped by a culture that still required them to be "innocent" and not to "sleep around" – the old double standard. Moreover, sexual harassment was all too common in the workplace, and the proliferation of pornography continued to commercialize women as sex objects. The sexual revolution, these women argued, was by and for men.
5. On the other hand, many feminists remained optimistic that the new sexual ethic could free women from

- those older moral constraints. They called for a revolution in sexual *values*, not simply behavior, that would end exploitation and grant women the freedom to explore their sexuality on equal terms with men.
6. In the 1970s, popular culture was suffused with discussions of the sexual revolution. Mass-market books with titles such as *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*, *Human Sexual Response*, and *The Sensuous Man* shot up the best-seller list.
 7. Hollywood took advantage of the new sexual ethic by making films with explicit erotic content that pushed the boundaries of middle-class taste. Films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), and *Shampoo* (1974), the latter starring Hollywood's leading ladies' man, Warren Beatty, led the way.
 9. In the second half of the decade, networks both exploited and criticized the new sexual ethic. In frivolous, light-hearted shows such as the popular *Charlie's Angels*, *Three's Company*, and *The Love Boat*, heterosexual couples explored the often confusing, and usually comical, landscape of sexual morality. At the same time the major networks produced more than a dozen made-for-TV movies sensationalizing the potential threats to children posed by a less strict sexual morality.
 10. Many Americans worried that marriage itself was threatened. What defined a healthy marriage in an age of rising divorce rates, changing sexual values, and feminist critiques of the nuclear family? Only a small minority of Americans rejected marriage outright. But many people came to believe that they needed help as marriage came under a variety of stresses – economic, psychological, and sexual.
 11. A therapeutic industry arose in response. Churches and secular groups alike established marriage seminars and counseling services to assist couples in sustaining a “healthy” marriage. A popular form of 1960s psychotherapy, the “encounter group,” was adapted to marriage counseling: Couples met in large groups to explore new methods of communicating. Americans increasingly defined marriage not simply by companionship and sexual fidelity but by the deeply felt emotional connection between two people.

C. Religion in the 1970s: The Fourth Great Awakening

1. Evangelical churches emphasized an intimate, *personal* salvation (being “born again”), focused on the literal scripture of the Bible, and regarded the death and resurrection of Jesus as the central message of Christianity. These tenets distinguished evangelicals from mainline Protestants as well as from Catholics and Jews, and they flourished in a handful of evangelical colleges, Bible schools, and seminaries in the postwar decades.
2. No one did more to keep the evangelical fire burning than Billy Graham. A graduate of the evangelical Wheaton College in Illinois, Graham cofounded Youth for Christ in 1945 and then toured the United States and Europe preaching the gospel.
3. Graham and other evangelicals in the 1950s and 1960s laid the groundwork for the Fourth Great Awakening. But it was the secular liberalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s that sparked the evangelical revival.
4. Many Americans regarded feminism, the counterculture, sexual freedom, homosexuality, pornography, divorce, and legalized abortion not as distinct issues, but as a collective sign of moral decay in society.
5. To seek answers and find order, more and more people turned to evangelical ministries, especially Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, and Assemblies of God churches.
6. As mainline churches lost about 15 percent of their membership between 1970 and 1985, evangelical church membership soared. Much of this astonishing growth came from the creative use of television. Graham had pounded the pavement and worn out shoe leather to reach his converts. But a new generation of preachers brought religious conversion directly into Americans' living rooms through television.
7. These so-called “televangelists” built huge media empires through small donations from millions of avid viewers – not to mention advertising.
8. Of primary concern to evangelical Christians was the family. Drawing on relevant passages from the Bible, evangelicals believed that the nuclear family, and not the individual, represented the fundamental unit of society. The family itself was organized along paternalist lines: father was breadwinner and disciplinarian, mother was nurturer and supporter.
9. Wherever one looked in the 1970s and early 1980s, American families were under strain. Nearly everyone agreed that the waves of social liberalism and economic transformation that swept over the nation in the 1960s and 1970s had destabilized society and, especially, family relationships.
10. But Americans did not agree about how to *re*stabilize families. Indeed, different approaches to the family would further divide the country in the 1980s and 1990s, as the New Right would increasingly make “family values” a political issue.

