

# The American People Face a New Century

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AS OUR CASE IS NEW, SO WE MUST THINK ANEW  
AND ACT ANEW. WE MUST DISENTHRALL OURSELVES,  
AND THEN WE SHALL SAVE OUR COUNTRY.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 1862

Well beyond its two-hundredth birthday as the twenty-first century began, the United States was both an old and a new nation. It boasted one of the longest uninterrupted traditions of democratic government of any country on earth. Indeed, it had pioneered the techniques of mass democracy and was, in that sense, the oldest modern polity. As one of the earliest countries to industrialize, America had also dwelt in the modern economic era longer than most nations.

But the Republic was in many ways still youthful as well. Innovation, entrepreneurship, and risk-taking—all characteristics of youth—were honored national values. The twenty-first century began much like the twentieth, with American society continuing to be rejuvenated by fresh waves of immigrants, full of energy and ambition. The U.S. economy, despite problems, pulsated as a driving engine of world economic growth. American inventions—especially computer and communications technologies—were transforming the face of global society. Consumers from Lisbon to Tokyo seemed to worship the icons of American culture—downing soft drinks and donning

blue jeans, watching Hollywood films, listening to rock or country music, even adopting indigenous American sports like baseball and basketball. In the realm of consumerism, American products appeared to have Coca-Colonized the globe.

The history of American society also seemed to have increased global significance as the third millennium of the Christian era opened. Americans were a pluralistic people who had struggled for centuries to provide opportunity and to achieve tolerance and justice for many different religious, ethnic, and racial groups. Their historical experience could offer valuable lessons to the rapidly internationalizing planetary society that was emerging at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Much history remained to be made as the country entered its third century of nationhood. The great social experiment of American democracy was far from completed as the United States faced its future. Astonishing breakthroughs in science and technology, especially in genetics and computer applications, presented Americans with stunning opportunities as well as

wrenching ethical choices. Ecological dangers made the responsible stewardship of a fragile planet more urgent than ever. Inequality and prejudice continued to challenge Americans to close the gap between their most hallowed values and the stark realities of modern life. And the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, violently heralded a new era of fear and anxiety.

But men and women make history only within the framework bequeathed to them by earlier generations. For better or worse, they march forward along time's path bearing the burdens of the past. Knowing when they have come to a truly new turn in the road, when they can lay part of their burden down and when they cannot, or should not—all this constitutes the sort of wisdom that only historical study can engender.



### Economic Revolutions

When the twentieth century opened, United States Steel Corporation was the flagship business of America's booming industrial revolution. A generation later, General Motors, annually producing millions of automobiles, became the characteristic American corporation, signaling the historic shift to a mass consumer economy that began in the 1920s and flowered fully in the 1950s. Following World War II, the rise of International Business Machines (IBM) symbolized yet another momentous transformation, to the fast-paced "information age," when the storing, organizing, and processing of data became an industry in its own right.

The pace of the information age soon accelerated. By century's end the rapid emergence of Microsoft Corporation and the phenomenal growth of the Internet heralded an explosive communications revolution. Americans now rocketed down the "information superhighway" toward the uncharted terrain of an electronic global village, where traditional geographic, social, and political boundaries could be vaulted with the tap of a keypad.

The communications revolution was full of both promise and peril. In the blink of an eye, ordinary citizens could gain access to information once available only to privileged elites with vast libraries or expert staffs at their disposal. Businesspeople instantaneously girdled the planet with transactions of prodigious scope and serpentine complexity. Japanese bankers might sell wheat contracts in Chicago and simultaneously direct the profits to buying oil shipments from the Persian Gulf offered by a broker in Amsterdam. By the late 1990s, a "dot-com" explosion of new commercial ventures



**The University Without Walls** Students getting their education from this facility at the Iowa Distance Learning Center need never enter a classroom.

quickly expanded the market (and the stock-market stakes) for entrepreneurs leading the way in making the Internet a twenty-first-century electronic mall, library, and entertainment center rolled into one.

But the very speed and efficiency of the new communications tools threatened to wipe out entire occupational categories. Postal carriers, travel agents, store clerks, bank tellers, stockbrokers, and all kinds of other workers whose business it was to mediate between product and client might find themselves roadkill on the information superhighway. White-collar jobs in financial services and high-tech engineering, once thought securely anchored in places like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, could now be "outsourced" to countries such as Ireland and India, where employees could help keep a company's global circuits firing twenty-four hours a day.

The high-tech economy also proved to be as prone to boom and bust as the old smokestack economy. In the spring of 2000, the stock market began its most precipitous slide since the Second World War. By the time the markets bottomed out in 2003, they had lost \$6



**The Rise and Fall of the NASDAQ Composite Index, 1994–2004** In March 2000 the NASDAQ Composite Index, replete with technology stocks, peaked at its all-time closing high of 5,048 before losing over 75 percent of its market value in the next three years. The same index had opened in February 1971 with a base of 100 points. (Source: *MSN Money*.)

trillion in value. The boom of the late 1990s turned out to be, as one observer put it, the “Dot.con.” Investors had scooped up shares in fledgling firms that proved unable to turn a profit, and stock prices imploded accordingly once the bubble burst. Millions of Americans watched aghast as their pension plans shrank by a third or more. Recent retirees scrambled back into the job market. The economic turbulence of the first years of the century stood as a sober reminder that even as the American economy generated extraordinary wealth and innovation by global standards, it was scarcely immune to the age-old vagaries of risk, error, scandal, and the business cycle.

Increasingly, scientific research was the motor that propelled the economy, and new scientific knowledge raised new moral dilemmas and provoked new political arguments. When scientists first unlocked the secrets of molecular genetic structure in the 1950s, the road lay open to breeding new strains of high-yield, pest- and weather-resistant crops; to curing hereditary diseases; and also, unfortunately, to unleashing genetic mutations that might threaten the fragile balance of the wondrous biosphere in which humankind was delicately suspended. By the dawn of the new century, scientists stood at the threshold of a revolution in biological engineering. The

Human Genome Project established the DNA sequencing of the thirty thousand human genes, pointing the way to radical new medical therapies—and to mouth-watering profits for bioengineering firms. Startling breakthroughs in the cloning of animals raised thorny questions about the legitimacy of applying cloning technology to human reproduction. Research into human stem cells held out the promise of cures for afflictions like Parkinson’s disease and Alzheimer’s. But the Bush administration shared the concern of certain religious groups that harvesting stem cells involved the destruction of human life in embryonic form. Bush therefore limited government funding for stem cell research, as Americans continued to struggle with the ethical implications of their vast new technological powers.

Other unprecedented ethical questions clamored for resolution. What principles should govern the allocation of human organs for lifesaving transplants? Was it wise in the first place to spend money on such costly procedures rather than devote society’s resources to improved sanitation, maternal and infant care, and nutritional and health education? How, if at all, should society regulate the increasingly lengthy and often painful process of dying? (See “Makers of America: Scientists and Engineers,” pp. 1014–1015.)

# MAKERS OF AMERICA

## Scientists and Engineers

Subatomic particles and space-bound satellites do not respect political boundaries. Disease-carrying viruses spread across the globe. Radio waves and Internet communications reach every corner of planet Earth. At first glance science, technology, and medicine appear to be quintessentially international phenomena. Scientists often pride themselves on the universal validity of scientific knowledge and the transnational character of scientific networks. In a world marked by political divisions, science evidently knows no bounds.

But a closer look reveals that national context does influence the character of scientific enterprise. American scientists have repeatedly made significant contributions to the life of the nation. They, in turn, have been shaped by its unique historical circumstances—especially America's intensifying concerns about national security in the twentieth century. Once marginal players in global intellectual life, American scientists now stand at the forefront of scientific advancement. In many ways the rise of American science has kept pace with the arrival of the United States as a world power.



**NASA Flight Directors Monitoring the Launch of the Apollo 11 Lunar Landing Mission from the Manned Spacecraft Center, Houston, Texas, July 1969**

Nowhere was this trend more evident than in the story of “Big Science.” The unusual demands of America's national security state during World War II and the Cold War required vast scientific investments. The result was Big Science, or multidisciplinary research enterprises of unparalleled size, scope, and cost. Big Science and Big Technology meant big bucks, big machines, and big teams of scientists and engineers. The close link between government and science was not new—precedents stretched as far back as the founding of the National Academy of Sciences during the Civil War. But the depression-era Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the wartime Manhattan Project ushered in ventures of colossal scale and ambition. As the head of the TVA wrote in 1944, “There is almost nothing, however fantastic, that (given competent organization) a team of engineers, scientists, and administrators cannot do today.”

Cold War competition with the Soviets translated into huge government investments in physics, chemistry, and aerospace. The equation was simple: national security depended on technological superiority, which entailed costly facilities for scientific research and ambitious efforts to recruit and train scientists. In the 1950s defense projects employed two-thirds of the nation's scientists and engineers. Laboratories, reactors, accelerators, and observatories proliferated. After the Soviets launched the world's first artificial satellite (*Sputnik*) in 1957, the international space race became America's top scientific priority. To land astronauts on the moon, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) spent a whopping \$25.4 billion over eleven years on Project Apollo. Another massive aerospace mission, President Reagan's controversial Strategic Defense Initiative (or “Star Wars”), consumed somewhere between \$32 billion and \$71 billion between 1984 and 1994.

In America's burgeoning “research universities,” the federal government found willing partners in the promotion of the scientific enterprise. University-employed scientists, largely paid by government grants, concen-



**A Woman Scientist Working on the Human Genome Project Studies a Map of the Y Chromosome**

Record numbers of women are now pursuing scientific careers, particularly in the biological sciences. In the related field of medicine, as many women as men enrolled in medical schools in 2004. Minority enrollment has climbed as well. In that year, 7 percent of entering medical students were Latino and 6.5 percent African American.

trated on basic research, accounting for over half of the estimated \$50 billion spent on basic science in 2002. Meanwhile, private industry spent additional billions on applied research and product development.

For consumers of air bags, silicon chips, and other high-tech gadgets, these investments yielded rich rewards as innovative technologies dramatically improved the quality of life. Over the course of the twentieth century, American corporations spearheaded a global revolution in communications and information technology. American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) and Radio Corporation of America (RCA) attended the birth of telephones, radio, and television. Apple, International Business Machines (IBM), and Microsoft introduced personal computers. Government and industry scientists together invented the Internet.

Twentieth-century advances in medical science and technology have also revolutionized American lives. Thanks to new drugs, devices, and methods of treatment, the average life expectancy in the United States

leapt from 47.3 years in 1900 to 77.0 years in 2000. In the first half of the twentieth century, physicians discovered hormones and vitamins, introduced penicillin and other antibiotics, and experimented with insulin therapy for diabetes and radiation therapy for cancer. More recently, cutting-edge medical science has nurtured *in vitro* fertilization; developed respirators, artificial hearts, and other medical devices; and attacked (though with limited success) the AIDS epidemic.

Much of the optimism for future medical breakthroughs centers on the \$3 billion Human Genome Project, which completed its mapping and sequencing of all the genetic material in the human body in 2003. Deemed the “holy grail” of genomics research, the project promised countless benefits, including new diagnoses for genetic defects, innovative therapies, and untold commercial applications. Coordinated by the Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health, the project involved thousands of scientists in universities and laboratories across the nation and around the globe.

To achieve such innovation, Big Science typically demands complex teams of scientists, engineers, and technicians. When traditional channels of recruitment came up short, scientific institutions increasingly recruited foreigners, women, and minorities. Immigrants and exiles played key roles in the development of the atomic bomb and Cold War weaponry. Long relegated to junior positions as assistants and technicians, women and minorities have recently made significant gains in the “white man’s world” of science. In 2001 women represented 26 percent of employed doctoral scientists and engineers in the United States, the foreign-born 24 percent, and minorities 21 percent.

Despite these stunning achievements, current evidence suggests that the United States might be losing its preeminence in science. After dominating the intellectual world from the 1960s through the 1990s, American scientists are now winning fewer prizes and patents and publishing fewer scientific papers than their peers in Europe and Asia. Experts predict that current school-age Americans will not be able to meet the rising demand for scientific expertise. Moreover, fewer foreigners will arrive to fill the gap, as international competition for their labor heats up in places like Japan, China, and India. For the United States to retain preeminence in science in the twenty-first century, it must continue to welcome all talent to the field. That means attracting both foreign-born scientists and young American students whose brainpower has long helped make the nation a scientific power.



## Affluence and Inequality

Americans were still an affluent people at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Median household income declined somewhat in the early 1990s but rebounded by 2002 to \$42,400. Yet even those Americans with incomes below the government's official poverty level (defined in 2004 as \$18,850 for a family of four) enjoyed a standard of living higher than that of two-thirds of the rest of humankind.

Americans were no longer the world's wealthiest people, as they had been in the quarter-century after World War II. Citizens of several other countries enjoyed higher average per-capita incomes, and many nations boasted more equitable distributions of wealth. In an unsettling reversal of long-term trends in American society, during the last two decades of the twentieth century, the rich got much richer, while the poor got an ever-shrinking share of the pie. The richest 20 percent of Americans in 2001 raked in nearly half the nation's income, whereas the poorest 20 percent received a mere 4 percent. The gap between rich and poor began to widen in the 1980s and widened further thereafter. That trend was evident in many industrial societies, but it was most pronounced in the United States. Between 1968 and 2000, the share of the nation's income that flowed to the top 20 percent of its households swelled from 40 percent to more than 49 percent. Even more striking, in the same period the top 5 percent of income earners saw their share of the national income grow from about 15 percent to a remarkable 21 percent. The Welfare Reform Bill of 1996, restricting access to social services and requiring able-bodied welfare recipients to find work, weakened the financial footing of many impoverished families still further.

Widening inequality could be measured in other ways as well. In the 1970s chief executives typically earned forty-one times as much as the average worker in their corporations; by the early 2000s, they earned 245 times as much. In 2004, 40 million people had no medical insurance. At the same time, some 34 million people, 12 percent of all Americans (8 percent of whites, 24 percent of African Americans, and 22 percent of Latinos), remained mired in poverty—a depressing indictment of the inequities afflicting an affluent and allegedly egalitarian republic.

What caused the widening income gap? Some critics pointed to the tax and fiscal policies of the Reagan and both Bush (father and son) presidencies, which favored the wealthy. But deeper-running historical currents probably played a more powerful role, as suggested by the similar experiences of other industrialized societies. Among the most conspicuous causes were intensifying global economic competition; the shrinkage in high-paying manufacturing jobs for semiskilled and unskilled



**Two Nations?** While decaying neighborhoods and the sad legions of the homeless blighted American urban life at the dawn of the twenty-first century, affluent Americans took refuge in gated communities like this one in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles.



### Who Pays Federal Income Taxes? (share of U.S. income tax, by income percentile)

Income Group (base income shown as of 2001)	1994	2001
Top 1% (above \$292,913)	28.7%	33.9%
Top 5% (above \$127,904)	47.4%	53.3%
Top 10% (above \$92,754)	59.1%	64.9%
Top 25% (above \$56,085)	79.5%	82.9%
Top 50% (above \$28,528)	95.2%	96.1%
Bottom 50% (below \$28,528)	4.8%	3.9%

Because the United States has long had a “progressive” income tax system, in which tax obligations are distributed according to ability to pay, widening income inequality was reflected in a redistribution of tax burdens. In the booming 1990s, the rich did indeed get richer—but they also paid an increasing fraction of the total federal tax take. These figures help explain why tax cuts benefit the wealthy more than middle-income earners and the poor. (Source: Internal Revenue Service data, Tax Foundation.)

### Widening Income Inequality

Share of Aggregate Income	1980	1990	2001
Lowest fifth	4.3	3.9	4.2
Second fifth	10.3	9.6	9.7
Middle fifth	16.9	15.9	15.4
Fourth fifth	24.9	24.0	22.9
Highest fifth	43.7	46.6	47.7
Top 5%	15.8	18.6	21.0

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the top fifth of the country’s households made significant gains in income, while everyone else lost ground. (Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2003.)

workers; the greater economic rewards commanded by educated workers in high-tech industries; the decline of unions; the growth of part-time and temporary work; the rising tide of relatively low-skill immigrants; and the increasing tendency of educated men and women to marry one another and both work, creating households with very high incomes. Educational opportunities also had a way of perpetuating inequality, starting with the underfunding of many schools in poor urban areas and the soaring cost of higher education. A 2004 study revealed that at the 146 most selective colleges, 74 per-

cent of the students came from families with incomes in the top 25 percent, compared to 3 percent of the students from the bottom income quartile.



### The Feminist Revolution

All Americans were caught up in the great economic changes of the late twentieth century, but no group was more profoundly affected than women. When the century opened, women made up about 20 percent of all workers. Over the next five decades, they increased their presence in the labor force at a fairly steady rate, except for a temporary spurt during World War II. Then, beginning in the 1950s, women’s entry into the workplace accelerated dramatically. By the 1990s nearly half of all workers were women, and the majority of working-age women held jobs outside the home. Most astonishing was the upsurge in employment among mothers. In 1950 nearly 90 percent of mothers with children under the age of six did not work for pay. But half a century later, a majority of women with children as young as one year old were wage earners. Women now brought home the bacon and then cooked it, too.

Beginning in the 1960s, many all-male strongholds, including Yale, Princeton, West Point, and even, belatedly, southern military academies like the Citadel and Virginia Military Institute, opened their doors to women. By the opening of the new century, women were piloting airliners, orbiting the earth, governing states and cities, and writing Supreme Court decisions.

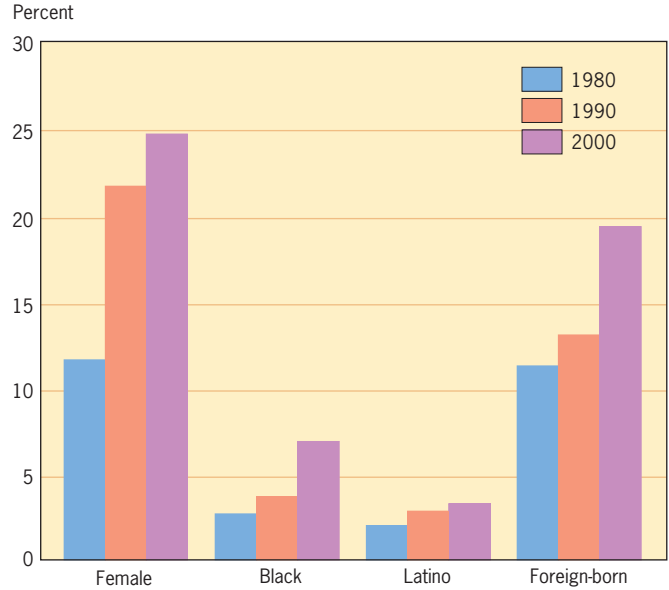
Yet despite these gains, many feminists remained frustrated. Women continued to receive lower wages—

### Percentage of Working Married Women with Children (husband present), 1950–2002

Year	Total Percentage	No Children Under 18	Children 6–17 Only	Children Under 6
1950	23.8	30.3	28.3	11.9
1960	30.5	34.7	39.0	18.6
1970	40.8	42.2	49.2	30.3
1980	50.1	46.0	61.7	45.1
1994	60.6	53.2	76.0	61.7
2002	61.5	54.8	77.9	60.8

(Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, relevant years.)

an average of 77 cents on the dollar in 2002 compared with men doing the same full-time work—and they tended to concentrate in a few low-prestige, low-paying occupations (the “pink-collar ghetto”). Although they made up more than half the population, women in 2002 accounted for only 29 percent of lawyers and judges (up from 5 percent in 1970) and 25 percent of physicians (up from 10 percent in 1970). Overt sexual discrimination explained some of this occupational segregation, but most of it seemed attributable to the greater burdens of parenthood on women than on men. Women were far more likely than men to interrupt their careers to bear and raise children, and even to choose less demanding



**Demographic Profile of Women, Minorities, and the Foreign-born in Nonacademic Science and Engineering Occupations, 1980–2000**  
 (Source: *Science and Engineering Indicators, 2004*, <http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind04/pdf/c03.pdf>.)

**Women’s World: Something Old, Something New**

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, revolutionary changes in the economy and in social values had opened new career possibilities to women, while not fully relieving them of their traditional duties as mothers and homemakers. Dramatic changes in race relations and the redefinition of gender roles at the end of the twentieth century transformed even tradition-bound institutions like the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, as this gathering of cadets suggests. Women’s athletics came into their own in the wake of the feminist revolution. In 1999 the U.S. Women’s World Cup Soccer Team brought home the trophy to a nation suddenly enthralled with women’s soccer.





"WELL, IT'S ABOUT TIME"



**The Justice Is a Lady, 1981** Herblock hails Sandra Day O'Connor's appointment to the Supreme Court.

career paths to allow for fulfilling those traditional roles. Discrimination and a focus on children also helped account for the persistence of a "gender gap" in national elections. Women continued to vote in greater numbers than men for Democratic candidates, who were often perceived as being more willing to favor government support for health and child care, education, and job equality, as well as being more vigilant to protect abortion rights.

As the revolution in women's status rolled on in the 2000s, men's lives changed as well. Some employers provided paternity leave in addition to maternity leave, in recognition of the shared obligations of the two-worker household. More men assumed traditional female responsibilities such as cooking, laundry, and child care. Recognizing the new realities of the modern

American household, Congress passed a Family Leave Bill in 1993, mandating job protection for working fathers as well as mothers who needed to take time off from work for family-related reasons.

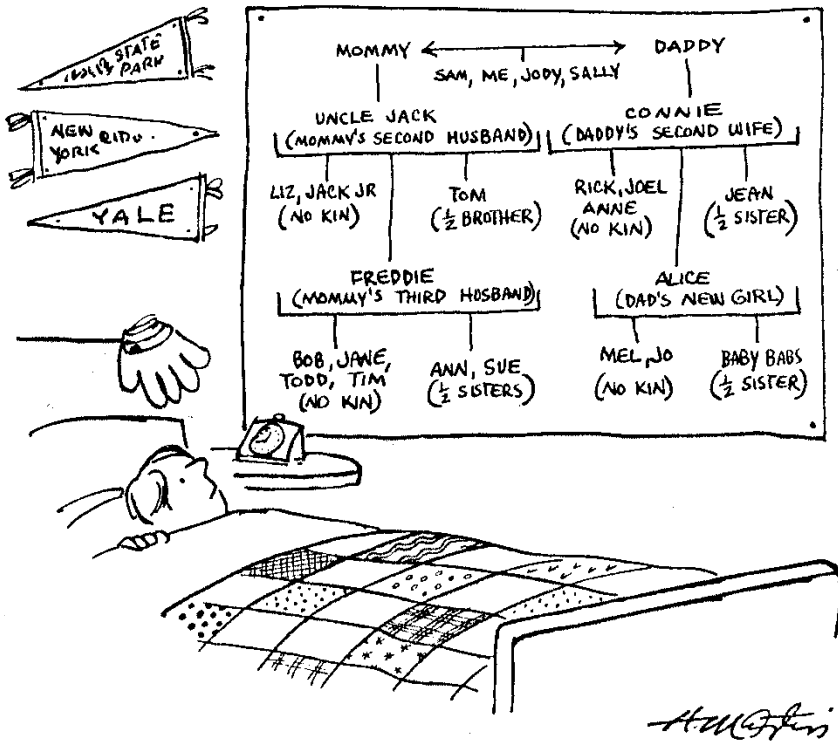
### **New Families and Old**

The nuclear family, once prized as the foundation of society and the nursery of the Republic, suffered heavy blows in modern America. By the 1990s one out of every two marriages ended in divorce. Seven times more children were affected by divorce than at the beginning of the century. Kids who commuted between separated parents were commonplace. The 1950s ideal of a family with two parents, only one of whom worked, was now a virtually useless way to picture the typical American household.

Traditional families were not only falling apart at an alarming rate but were also increasingly slow to form in the first place. The proportion of adults living alone tripled in the four decades after 1950, and by the 1990s nearly one-third of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine had never married. In the 1960s, 5 percent of all births were to unmarried women, but three decades later one out of four white babies, one out of three Latino babies, and two out of three African American babies were born to single mothers. Every fourth child in America was growing up in a household that lacked two parents. The collapse of the traditional family contributed heavily to the pauperization of many women and children, as single parents (usually mothers) struggled to keep their households economically afloat. Single parenthood outstripped race and ethnicity as the most telling predictor of poverty in America.

Child-rearing, the family's foremost function, was being increasingly assigned to "parent-substitutes" at day-care centers or schools—or to television, the modern age's "electronic baby-sitter." Estimates were that the average child by age sixteen had watched up to fifteen thousand hours of TV—more time than was spent in the classroom. Parental anxieties multiplied with the advent of the Internet—an electronic cornucopia where youngsters could "surf" through poetry and problem sets as well as pornography.

But if the *traditional* family was increasingly rare, the family itself remained a bedrock of American society in the early twenty-first century, as viable families now assumed a variety of forms. Children in house-



**The Modern Family Tree**  
High divorce rates and the increasing numbers of “blended families” in modern American society could often be confusing.

holds led by a single parent, stepparent, or grandparent, as well as children with gay or lesbian parents, encountered a degree of acceptance that would have been unimaginable a generation earlier. Even the notion of gay marriage, which emerged as a major public controversy when the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled it legal in 2003, signaled that the idea of marriage retained its luster. Teenage pregnancy, a key source of single parenthood, was also on the decline after the mid-1990s. Even divorce rates appeared to ebb a bit, or at least stabilize, with four divorces per thousand people in 2001, down from five per thousand in 1985. The family was not evaporating, but evolving into multiple forms.

### **The Aging of America**

Old age was more and more likely to be a lengthy experience for Americans, who were living longer than ever before. A person born at the dawn of the century could expect to survive less than fifty years, whereas someone born in 2000 could anticipate a life span of seventy-seven

years. (The figures were slightly lower for nonwhites, reflecting differences in living standards, especially diet and health care.) The census of 1950 recorded that women for the first time made up a majority of Americans, thanks largely to greater female longevity. Miraculous medical advances lengthened and strengthened lives. Noteworthy were the development of antibiotics after 1940 and Dr. Jonas Salk’s discovery in 1953 of a vaccine against a dreaded crippler, polio.

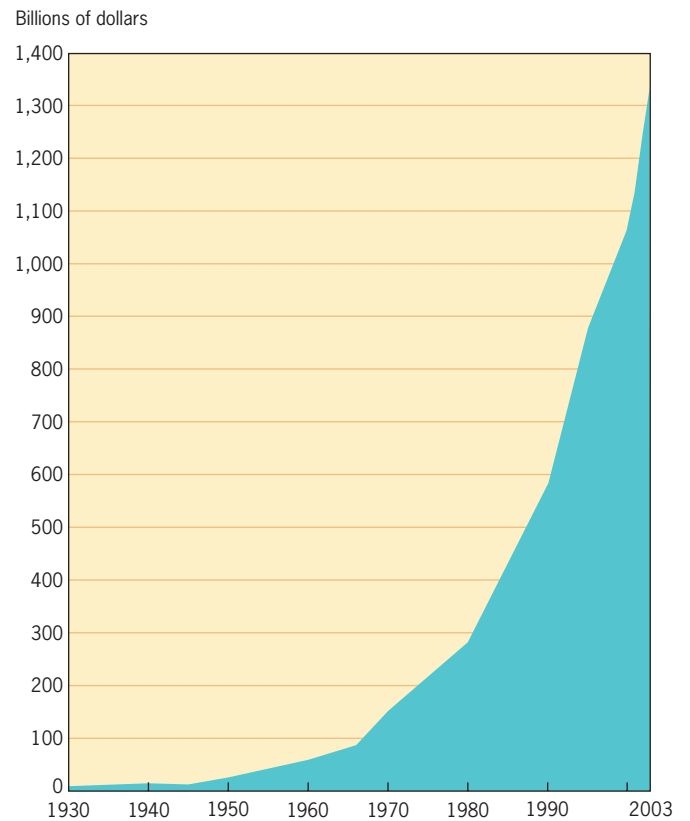
Longer lives spelled more older people. One American in eight was over sixty-five years of age in 2000, and projections were that one of every five people would be in the “sunset years” by 2050, as the median age rose toward forty. This aging of the population raised a host of political, social, and economic questions. Elderly people formed a potent electoral bloc that aggressively lobbied for government favors and achieved real gains for senior citizens. The share of GNP spent on health care for people over sixty-five more than doubled in the three decades after the enactment of Medicare in 1965. This growth in medical payments for the old far outstripped the growth of educational expenditures for the young, with corresponding consequences for the social and economic situations of both populations. As late as the



**Senior Power** Living longer and living healthier, older Americans coalesced into one of America’s most politically powerful interest groups as the twentieth century drew to a close.

1960s, nearly a quarter of Americans over the age of sixty-five lived in poverty; three decades later only about one in ten did. The figures for young people moved in the reverse direction: whereas 15 percent of children were living in poverty in the 1970s, nearly 17 percent were poor in 2002.

These triumphs for senior citizens also brought fiscal strains, especially on the Social Security system, established in 1935 to provide income for retired workers. When Social Security began, most workers continued to toil after age sixty-five. By century’s end only a small minority did (about 15 percent of men and 8 percent of women), and a majority of the elderly population relied primarily on Social Security checks for their living expenses. Contrary to popular mythology, Social Security payments to retirees did not simply represent reimbursement for contributions that the elderly had



**Government Expenditures for Social Welfare, 1930–2003** “Social welfare” includes unemployment and old-age insurance, health care, and veterans’ benefits. The skyrocketing costs from the mid-1960s onward reflect new commitments made through Great Society programs and the increasing size (and political clout) of the elderly population, who were the main beneficiaries of expensive programs like Medicare. The steep rise after 1970 is also explained by the galloping inflation of the 1970s. (Sources: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003*, and Office of Management and Budget, 2003.)

made during their working lives. In fact, the payments of current workers into the Social Security system funded the benefits to the current generation of retirees. By the time the new century opened, those benefits had risen so high, and the ratio of active workers to retirees had dropped so low, that drastic adjustments were necessary. The problem intensified as elders found the cost

of medical care, especially prescription drugs and long-term nursing care, rising at a far faster clip than their retirement benefits were designed to cover.

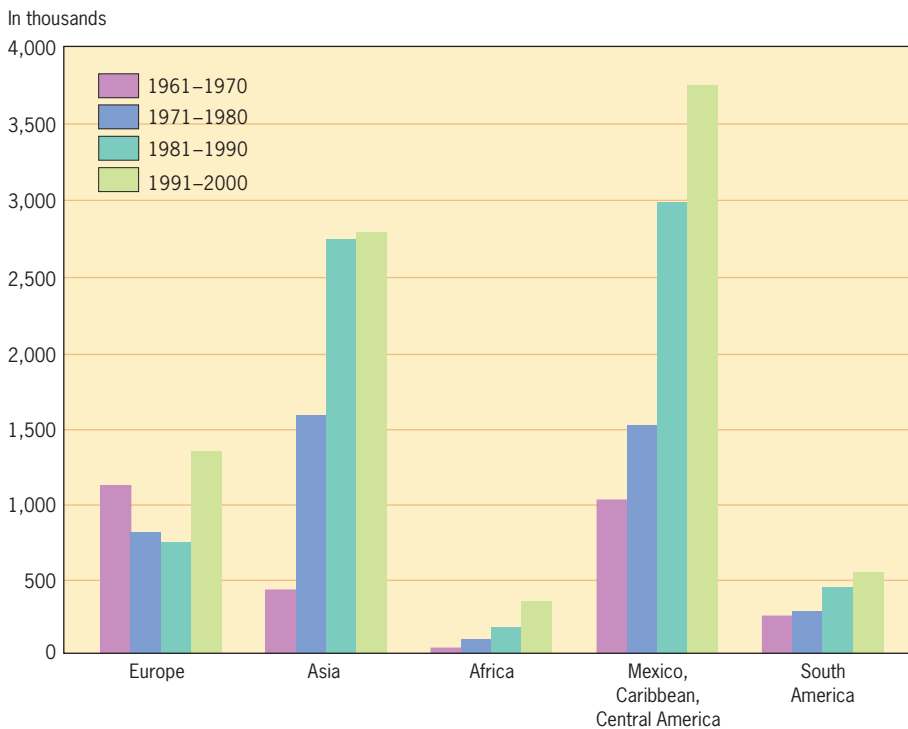
At the beginning of the new century, as the huge wave of post-World War II baby boomers approached retirement age, it seemed that the “unfunded liability”—the difference between what the government had promised to pay to the elderly and the taxes it expected to take in—might rise above \$7 trillion, a sum that threatened to bankrupt the Republic unless drastic reforms were adopted. Yet because of the electoral power of older Americans, Social Security and Medicare reform remained the “third rail” of American politics, which politicians touched only at their peril. Pressures mounted nonetheless to cut benefits, persuade older Americans to work longer, invest the current Social Security surplus in equities and bonds to meet future obligations, or even privatize a portion of Social Security by giving younger workers the option to invest some of their payroll taxes in individual retirement accounts. In the absence of bold reforms, a war between the generations loomed in the twenty-first century, as payments to the nonworking elderly threatened to soak up fully half of the working population’s income by about 2040.



### The New Immigration

Newcomers continued to flow into modern America. They washed ashore in waves that numbered nearly 1 million persons per year from the 1980s into the early twenty-first century—the largest inflow of immigrants in America’s experience. In striking contrast to the historic pattern of immigration, Europe contributed far fewer people than did Asia and Latin America. And unlike their predecessors, many of the new immigrants settled not only in traditional ethnic enclaves in cities and towns but also in the sprawling suburbs of places like Los Angeles, Dallas, and Atlanta, where many of the new jobs were to be found.

What prompted this new migration to America? The truth is that the newest immigrants came for many of the same reasons as the old. They typically left countries where populations were growing rapidly and where agricultural and industrial revolutions were shaking people loose from old habits of life—conditions almost identical to those in nineteenth-century Europe. And they came to America, as previous immigrants had done, in search of



**Recent Legal Immigration by Area of Origin, 1961–2000**  
 (Source: *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 2002 Department of Homeland Security.)



**Changing Colors** A second-grade bilingual class recites the Pledge of Allegiance (in both Spanish and English) in Austin, Texas. By the end of the twenty-first century, Americans who can trace their ancestry directly to Europe might well be a minority in the United States.

jobs and economic opportunity. Some came with skills and even professional degrees, from India or Taiwan or the former Soviet Union, and they found their way into middle-class jobs. But most came with fewer skills and less education, seeking work as janitors, nannies, farm laborers, lawn cutters, or restaurant workers.

The Southwest, from Texas to California, felt the immigrant impact especially sharply, as Mexican migrants—by far the largest contingent of modern immigrants—concentrated heavily in that region. By the turn of the century, Latinos made up nearly one-third of the population in Texas, Arizona, and California, and 40 percent in New Mexico—amounting to a demographic *reconquista* of the lands lost by Mexico in the war of 1846.

The size and geographic concentration of the Latino population in the Southwest had few precedents in the history of American immigration. Most previous groups had been so thinly scattered across the land that they had little choice but to learn English and make their way in the larger American society, however much they might have longed to preserve their native language and customs. But it seemed possible that Mexican Americans might succeed in creating a truly bicultural zone in the booming southwestern states, especially since their mother culture lay accessible just next door.

Some old-stock Americans worried about the capacity of the modern United States to absorb these new immigrants. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of

1986 attempted to choke off illegal entry by penalizing employers of undocumented aliens and by granting amnesty to many of those already here. Anti-immigrant sentiment flared especially sharply in California in the wake of an economic recession in the early 1990s. California voters approved a ballot initiative that attempted to deny benefits, including education, to illegal immigrants, though it was later struck down by the courts. The state then passed another measure in 1998 to end bilingual education in California schools.

Yet the fact was that foreign-born people accounted for only about 11.5 percent of the American population in 2002, a far smaller proportion than the historical high point of nearly 15 percent recorded in the census of 1910, but evidence nonetheless that American society continued to welcome—and need—newcomers. Somewhat inconsistently, critics charged both that immigrants robbed citizens of jobs and that they dumped themselves on the welfare rolls at the taxpayers' expense. But studies showed that immigrants took jobs scorned by Americans and that they paid more dollars in taxes (withholding and Social Security taxes, as well as sales taxes) than they claimed for welfare payments. The infusion of young immigrants and their offspring was just what the country needed when faced with the challenges of an aging population. A more urgent worry was that unscrupulous employers might take cruel advantage of alien workers, who often had scant knowledge of their legal rights.

# MAKERS OF AMERICA



## The Latinos

Today Mexican food is handed through fast-food drive-up windows in all fifty states, Spanish-language broadcasts fill the airwaves, and the Latino community has its own telephone book, the *Spanish Yellow Pages*. Latinos send representatives to Congress and mayors to city hall, record hit songs, paint murals, and teach history. Latinos, among the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population, include Puerto Ricans, frequent voyagers between their native island and northeastern cities; Cubans, many of them refugees from the communist dictatorship of Fidel Castro, concentrated in Miami and southern Florida; and Central Americans, fleeing the ravages of civil war in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

But the most populous group of Latinos derives from Mexico. The first significant numbers of Mexicans began heading for *El Norte* (“the North”) around 1910, when the upheavals of the Mexican Revolution stirred and shuffled the Mexican population into more or less

constant flux. Their northward passage was briefly interrupted during the Great Depression, when thousands of Mexican nationals were deported. But immigration resumed during World War II, and since then a steady flow of legal immigrants has passed through border checkpoints, joined by countless millions of their undocumented countrymen and countrywomen stealing across the frontier on moonless nights.

For the most part, these Mexicans came to work in the fields, following the ripening crops northward to Canada through the summer and autumn months. In winter many headed back to Mexico, but some gathered instead in the cities of the Southwest—El Paso, Los Angeles, Houston, and San Bernardino. There they found regular work, even if lack of skills and racial discrimination often confined them to manual labor. City jobs might pay less than farm labor, but the work was steady and offered the prospect of a stable home.



### Cuban Refugees Arriving in the United States

These multiracial exiles were among the many thousands of Cubans who fled to the United States in the years following Fidel Castro’s seizure of power in Cuba in 1959. One such refugee, six-year-old Elian Gonzalez, caused a diplomatic tug-of-war in 2000 between the Cuban community in Miami, the Cuban government, and the U.S. Justice Department. Ultimately, Elian was returned to Cuba to live with his father over his Miami relatives’ objections.



**Chicana Pride** A Mexican American girl celebrates her cultural heritage at the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio.

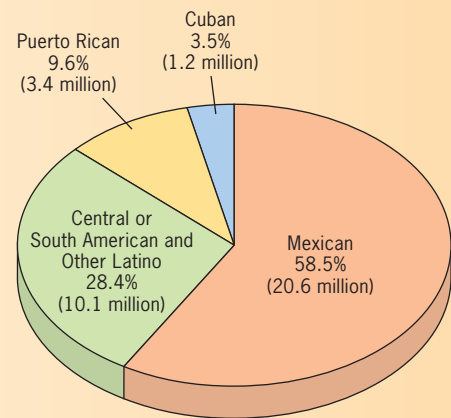
**Mexican American Farm Workers Pitting Apricots in Fruit Groves near Los Angeles, 1924**



Houses may have been shabby in the barrios, but these Mexican neighborhoods provided a sense of togetherness, a place to raise a family, and the chance to join a mutual aid society. Such societies, or *Mutualistas*, sponsored baseball leagues, helped the sick and disabled, and defended their members against discrimination.

Mexican immigrants lived so close to the border that their native country acted like a powerful magnet, drawing them back time and time again. Mexicans frequently returned to see relatives or visit the homes of their youth, and relatively few became U.S. citizens. Indeed, in many Mexican American communities, it was a badge of dishonor to apply for U.S. citizenship.

The Mexican government, likewise influenced by the proximity of the two countries, intervened in the daily lives of its nationals in America, further discouraging them from becoming citizens of their adopted country. As Anglo reformers attempted to Americanize the immigrants in the 1910s and 1920s, the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles launched a Mexicanization program. The consulate sponsored parades on *Cinco de Mayo* (“Fifth of May”), celebrating Mexico’s defeat of a French army at the Battle of Puebla in 1892, and opened special Spanish-language schools for children. Since World War II, the American-born generation has carried on the fight for political representation, economic opportunity, and cultural preservation.



**Sources of Latino Population in the United States, 2000**  
(Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003.*)

Fresh arrivals from Mexico and from the other Latin American nations daily swell the Latino communities across America. The census of 2000 revealed that Latinos are now the largest minority group in the United States, surpassing African Americans. As the United States moves through the twenty-first century, it is taking on a pronounced Spanish accent, although Latinos’ reticence to vote in elections has retarded their influence on American politics.



**The Oldest Americans** Members of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe celebrate the opening of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., 2004.

### **Beyond the Melting Pot**

Thanks both to continued immigration and to their own high birthrate, Latinos were becoming an increasingly important minority (see “Makers of America: The Latinos,” pp. 1024–1025). The United States by 2003 was home to about 39 million of them. They included some 26 million Chicanos, or Mexican Americans, mostly in the Southwest, as well as 3 million Puerto Ricans, chiefly in the Northeast, and more than 1 million Cubans in Florida (where it was jokingly said that Miami had become the most “Anglo” city in Latin America).

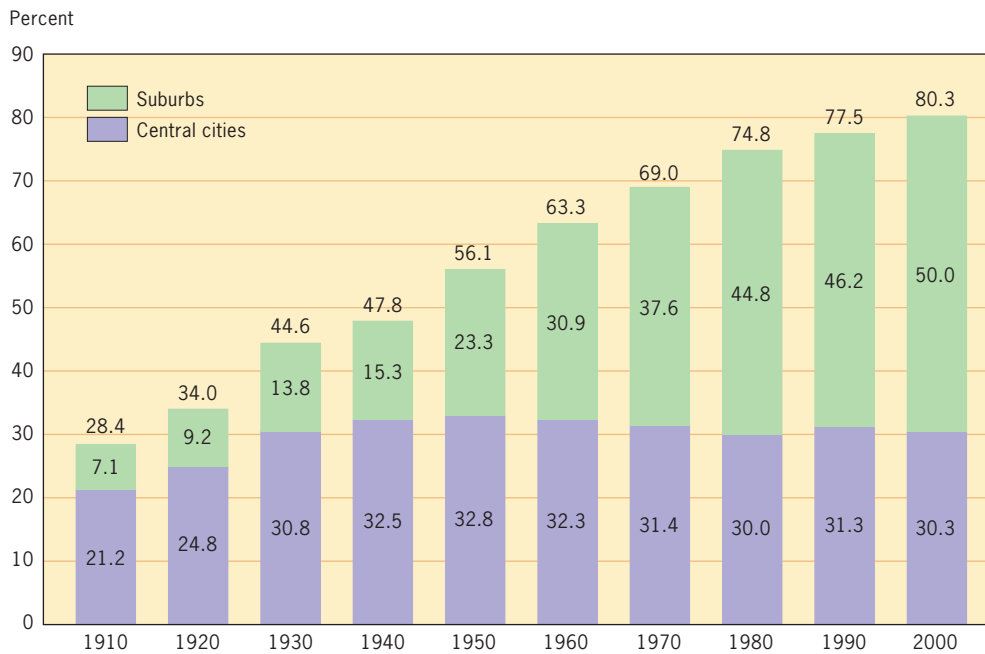
Flexing their political muscles, Latinos elected mayors of Miami, Denver, and San Antonio. After years of struggle, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), headed by the soft-spoken and charismatic César Chávez, succeeded in improving working conditions for the mostly Chicano “stoop laborers” who followed the cycle of planting and harvesting across the American West. Latino influence seemed likely to grow,

as suggested by the increasing presence of Spanish-language ballots and television broadcasts. Latinos, newly confident and organized, became the nation's largest ethnic minority, outnumbering even African Americans, in 2003. Indeed by the early twenty-first century, the Chicano population of America's largest state, California, led the Anglo population, making the state a patchwork of minorities with no single ethnic majority. In 2003 most newborns in California were Latino, a powerful harbinger of the state's demographic future.

Asian Americans also made great strides. By the 1980s they were America's fastest-growing minority, and their numbers reached nearly 12 million by 2002. Once feared and hated as the “yellow peril” and consigned to the most menial and degrading jobs, citizens of Asian ancestry were now counted among the most prosperous Americans. The typical Asian American household enjoyed an income nearly 25 percent greater than that of the typical white household in 2003.

Indians, the original Americans, numbered some 2.4 million in the 2000 census. Half of them had left their





**Percent of Total Population Living in Metropolitan Areas and in Their Central Cities and Suburbs, 1910–2000**  
(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census of Population, 1910 to 2000, Compiled in *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, Number 2002.)

reservations to live in cities. Meanwhile, unemployment and alcoholism had blighted reservation life. Many tribes took advantage of their special legal status as independent nations by opening bingo halls and gambling casinos for the general public on reservation lands, but the cycle of discrimination and poverty proved hard to break.

### **Cities and Suburbs**

America's "alabaster cities" of song and story grew more sooty and less safe in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Crime was the great scourge of urban life. The rate of violent crimes committed in cities reached an all-time high in the drug-infested 1980s and then leveled off in the early 1990s. The number of violent crimes even began to decline substantially in many areas after 1995. Nevertheless, murders, robberies, and rapes remained shockingly common not only in cities but also in suburbs and rural areas. America imprisoned a larger fraction of its citizens than almost any other country in the world, and some desperate citizens resorted to armed vigilante tactics to protect themselves.

The migration from cities to the suburbs was so swift and massive that by the mid-1990s a majority of

Americans were suburban dwellers. Jobs, too, became suburbanized. The nation's rather brief "urban age" lasted little more than seven decades after 1920, and with its passing many observers saw a new fragmentation and isolation in American life. Some affluent suburban neighborhoods walled themselves off behind elaborate security systems in "gated communities," making it harder, perhaps, to sustain a sense of a larger and inclusive national community. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the suburban rings around big cities such as New York, Chicago, Houston, and Washington, D.C., were becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, though individual schools and towns were often homogeneous.

Suburbs grew fastest in the West and Southwest. In the outer orbits of Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, and Phoenix, builders of roads, water mains, and schools could barely keep up with the new towns sprouting across the hardscrabble landscapes. Newcomers came not only from nearby cities but from other regions of the United States as well. A momentous shift of the American population was under way, as inhabitants from the Northeast and the Rustbelt Midwest moved southward and westward to job opportunities and the sun. The Great Plains, where 60 percent of all counties were losing population as the twentieth century ended, faced the sharpest decline, hollowing out the

traditional American heartland. By the early twenty-first century, the Great Plains contained fewer people than the Los Angeles basin, despite being five times the size of the entire state of California.

Some major cities exhibited signs of renewal. Commercial redevelopment gained ground in cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and even the classic “city without a center,” Los Angeles. Well-to-do residents reclaimed once-fashionable neighborhoods and sent real estate values soaring. But these latter-day urban homesteaders struggled to make their cities genuine centers of residential integration. Cities stubbornly remained as divided by wealth and race as the suburban social landscape surrounding them.



### Minority America

Racial and ethnic tensions also exacerbated the problems of American cities. These stresses were especially evident in Los Angeles, which, like New York a century earlier, was a magnet for minorities, especially immigrants from Asia and Latin America. When in 1992 a mostly white jury exonerated white Los Angeles police officers who had been videotaped ferociously beating a black suspect, the minority neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles erupted in rage. Arson and looting laid waste entire city blocks, and scores of people were killed. In a sobering demonstration of the complexity of modern American racial rivalries, many black rioters vented their anger at the white police and the judicial system by attacking Asian shopkeepers, who in turn formed armed patrols to protect their property. A decade later many a burned-out lot remained abandoned and weed-choked in neighborhoods still plagued by gang violence and the demoralizing effects of grinding poverty.

The Los Angeles riots vividly testified to black skepticism about the American system of justice. Just three years later, again in Los Angeles, the televised spectacle of former football star O. J. Simpson's murder trial fed white disillusionment with the state of race relations. After months of testimony that seemed to point to Simpson's guilt, the jury acquitted him, presumably because certain Los Angeles police officers involved in the case had been shown to harbor racist sentiments. In a later civil trial, another jury unanimously found Simpson liable for the “wrongful deaths” of his former wife and another victim. The reaction to the Simpson verdicts revealed the yawning

*In 1990 the African American intellectual Shelby Steele (b. 1946) declared in his provocative book, *The Content of Our Character*,*

*“What is needed now is a new spirit of pragmatism in racial matters where blacks are seen simply as American citizens who deserve complete fairness and in some cases developmental assistance, but in no case special entitlements based on color. We need deracinated social policies that attack poverty rather than black poverty and that instill those values that make for self-reliance.”*

chasm that separated white and black America, as most whites continued to believe Simpson guilty, while a majority of African Americans told pollsters that the original not-guilty verdict was justified. Similarly, complaints by African Americans that they had been unlawfully kept from the polls during the 2000 presidential election in Florida reflected the conviction of many blacks that they were still facing a Jim Crow South of systematic racial disfranchisement.

American cities have always held an astonishing variety of ethnic and racial groups, but by the late twentieth century, minorities made up a majority of the population of many American cities, as whites fled to the suburbs. In 2002, 52 percent of all blacks lived in central cities within metropolitan areas, compared with only 21 percent of whites. The most desperate black ghettos, housing a hapless “underclass” in the inner core of the old industrial cities, were especially problematic. Successful blacks who had benefited from the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s followed whites to the suburbs, leaving a residue of the poorest poor in the old ghettos. Without a middle class to sustain community institutions like schools and small businesses, the inner cities, plagued by unemployment and drug addiction, seemed bereft of leadership, cohesion, resources, and hope.

Single women headed about 43 percent of black families in 2002, more than three times the rate for whites.

Many African American women, husbandless and jobless, necessarily depended on welfare to feed their children. As social scientists increasingly emphasized the importance of the home environment for success in school, it became clear that many fatherless, impoverished African American children seemed consigned to suffer from educational handicaps that were difficult to overcome.

Some segments of the African American community did prosper in the wake of the civil rights gains of the 1950s and 1960s, although they still had a long hill to climb before reaching full equality. By 2002, 33 percent of all black families (compared to 57 percent of all white families) had incomes of at least \$50,000, qualifying them as middle-class. Blacks continued to make headway in political life. The number of black elected officials had risen above the nine thousand mark, including more than three dozen members of Congress and the mayors of several large cities. Voting tallies demonstrated that successful black politicians were moving beyond isolated racial constituencies and into the political mainstream by appealing to a wide variety of voters. In 1989 Virginians, only 15 percent of whom were black, chose L. Douglas Wilder as the first African American elected to serve as a state governor. In 1994 voters in Illinois made Carol Moseley-Braun the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Senate. In 2001 President George W. Bush appointed Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice to top cabinet-level posts in his administration, as secretary of state and national security adviser respectively. (Rice succeeded Powell as secretary of state in the second Bush administration.)

By the early twenty-first century, blacks also dramatically advanced into higher education, though the educational gap between blacks and whites remained. In 2002, 17 percent of blacks over age twenty-five had a bachelor's degree, compared to 29 percent of whites. The political assault against affirmative action in California and elsewhere in the 1990s only compounded the obstacles to advanced training for many young African Americans. But defenders of affirmative action chalked up a major victory in 2003 when the Supreme Court in a key case involving the University of Michigan affirmed that achieving racial diversity on college campuses was a legitimate means to secure a more equitable society. The court preserved affirmative action in university admissions as long as schools avoided using quotas, point systems, or other mechanistic ways of diversifying their student bodies.

**Still Fighting to Vote** This African American father and daughter are participating in a rally in downtown Miami several weeks after the November 2000 election to demand a recount of dismissed presidential election ballots. Many Florida blacks complained that election officials had disproportionately disqualified their votes and unfairly turned them away from the polls, resurrecting the kind of obstacles that long had kept blacks from voting in the South.



Controversial issues of color and culture also pervaded the realm of ideas in the late twentieth century. Echoing early-twentieth-century “cultural pluralists” like Horace

Kallen and Randolph Bourne, many intellectuals after 1970 embraced the creed of “multiculturalism.” The new mantra stressed the need to preserve and promote, rather than squash, a variety of distinct ethnic and racial cultures in the United States.

The trajectory between the two epochs was far from straight. In the middle third of the century, thinkers tended to emphasize race-blind tolerance and universal qualities of the human species that transcend distinctions of nationality, color, or creed. In this view, farmers in Peoria differ little from their counterparts in Peru.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, ethnic pride became the catchword, and universalistic assumptions lost their luster. Frustrated black leaders reconsidered earlier integrationist goals, “white ethnics” mounted a backlash against race-based affirmative action, and new immigrants from Asia and Latin America streamed into the country, eager to succeed without forfeiting their cultural inheritance. Multiculturalists replaced the aging symbol of the “melting pot” with the colorful complexity of the “salad bowl.”

The nation’s classrooms became battlegrounds for the debate over America’s commitment to pluralism. Multiculturalists attacked the traditional curriculum as “Eurocentric” and advocated greater focus on the achievements of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. In response, critics charged that too much stress on ethnic difference would come at the expense of national cohesion and an appreciation of common American values.

The Census Bureau further enlivened the debate when in 2000 it allowed respondents to identify themselves with more than one of the six standard racial categories (black, white, Latino, American Indian, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander). Signifying a mounting revolution in attitudes toward race, nearly 7 million Americans chose to describe themselves as biracial or multiracial. As recently as the 1960s, interracial marriage was still illegal in sixteen states. But by the early twenty-first century, many Americans, including such celebrities as golfer Tiger Woods and singer Mariah Carey, were proclaiming their mixed heritage as a point of pride.



### The Life of the Mind

Despite the mind-sapping chatter of the “boob tube,” Americans in the early twenty-first century read more, lis-

tened to more music, and were better educated than ever before. Colleges awarded some 2.5 million degrees in 2004, and one person in four in the twenty-five-to-thirty-four-year-old age group was a college graduate. This expanding mass of educated people lifted the economy to more advanced levels while creating consumers of “high culture.” Americans annually made some 300 million visits to museums in the 1990s and patronized about a thousand opera companies and fifteen hundred symphony orchestras—as well as countless popular music groups.

What Americans read said much about the state of American society in the new century. Among the most striking development in American letters was the rise of authors from the once-marginal regions and ethnic groups now coming into their own. Reflecting the general population shift westward, the West became the subject of a particularly rich literary outpouring. Larry McMurtry wrote about the small-town West and lovingly recollected the end of the cattle-drive era in *Lonesome Dove* (1985). Raymond Carver penned understated and powerful stories about working-class life in the Pacific Northwest. Annie Dillard, Ivan Doig, and Jim Harrison re-created the gritty frontier history of that same verdant region. David Guterson penned a moving tale of

*In her touching novel The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan explored the complex dilemmas of growing up as a Chinese American:*

“‘A girl is like a young tree,’ [my mother] said. ‘You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. . . .’ Over the years I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. “It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing.”



(left) Author Toni Morrison; (right) Author Jhumpa Lahiri

interracial anxiety and affection in the World War II–era Pacific Northwest in *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994). Wallace Stegner, the acknowledged dean of western writers, produced several works that far transcended their regional themes, including *Angle of Repose* (1971) and *Crossing to Safety* (1987). Norman MacLean, a former English professor who turned to fiction writing in his retirement, left two unforgettable accounts of his boyhood in Montana: *A River Runs Through It* (1976) and *Young Men and Fire* (1992).

African American authors and artists also increasingly made their mark. Playwright August Wilson retold the history of black Americans in the twentieth century, with special emphasis on the psychic costs of the northward migration (*Fences*, 1985; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 1988; *Jitney*, 1998). In the usually lighthearted medium of the Broadway musical, George Wolfe sensitively explored sobering questions of black identity in *Jelly's Last Jam* (1992), the life story of the great New Orleans jazzman “Jelly Roll” Morton. Alice Walker gave fictional voice to the experiences of black women in her hugely popular *The Color Purple* (1982). Toni Morrison wove a bewitching portrait of maternal affection in *Beloved* (1987) and in 1993 became the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Edward P. Jones inventively rendered the life of a slave-owning black family in his Pulitzer Prize–winning *The*

*Known World* (2003). Native Americans, too, achieved literary recognition. Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday won a Pulitzer Prize for his portrayal of Indian life in *House Made of Dawn* (1968). James Welch wrote movingly about his Blackfoot ancestors in *Fools Crow* (1986).

Asian American authors also flourished, among them playwright David Hwang, novelist Amy Tan, and essayist Maxine Hong Kingston, whose *Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) imaginatively reconstructed the obscure lives of the earliest Chinese immigrants. In *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), Gish Jen guided her readers into the poignant comedy of suburban family relationships that was not uncommon for second-generation Asian Americans. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) explored the sometimes painful relationship between immigrant Indian parents and their American-born children.

Latino writers made their mark as well. Sandra Cisneros drew on her own life as a Mexican American child to evoke Latino life in working-class Chicago in *The House on Mango Street* (1984). The older European migration continued to hold literary appeal, too, notably with Frank McCourt's memories of an Irish and American childhood, captured in *Angela's Ashes* (1996).

Women writers and women's themes forged to the fictional forefront as the feminist movement advanced. Jane Smiley modeled her touching narrative



**MECHA Mural, by Student Artists Directed by Sergio O'Cadiz, 1974**

People have scribbled on walls since time immemorial, but in the 1960s and 1970s, mural painting emerged as a new form of American folk art. Drab buildings and bare fences, often in minority inner-city neighborhoods, were turned into huge canvases. This mural incorporates many Mexican American and Mexican themes, including the United Farm Workers' bird symbol and a skeleton, a frequent motif in Mexican art.

of a midwestern farm family, *A Thousand Acres* (1991), on Shakespeare's *King Lear* and followed up with a hilarious spoof of university life in *Moo* (1995). Ann Tyler penned memorable portraits of quirky characters, male as well as female, in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) and *The Accidental Tourist* (1985). E. Annie Proulx won widespread acclaim with her comical yet tender portrayal of a struggling family in *The Shipping News* (1993). The rising interest in feminist and African American themes revived the popularity of a 1930s writer, Zora Neale Hurston, especially her naturalistic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, first published in 1937.

New York became the art capital of the world after World War II, as well-heeled Americans supported a large number of painters and sculptors. The Ford Foundation also became a major patron of the arts, as did the federal government after the creation of the tax-supported National Endowment for the Arts in

1965. The open and tradition-free American environment seemed especially congenial to the experimental mood of much modern art. Jackson Pollock pioneered abstract expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s, flinging paint on huge flats stretched on his studio floor. Realistic representation went out the window, as artists like Pollock and Willem de Kooning strove to create "action paintings" that expressed the painter's individuality and made the viewer a creative participant in defining the painting's meaning. Pop artists in the 1960s, notably Andy Warhol, canonized on canvas everyday items of consumer culture, such as soup cans. Robert Rauschenberg made elaborate collages out of objects like cardboard boxes and newspaper clippings. Claes Oldenburg tried to stun viewers into a new visual awareness with unfamiliar versions of familiar objects, such as giant plastic sculptures of pillow-soft telephones. The venerable Georgia O'Keeffe,

whose first exhibit was in 1916, continued well into the post–World War II period to produce stunningly immaculate, vividly colored paintings of her beloved Southwest, and moved increasingly into abstract works as her career progressed.

On the stage, playwright David Mamet analyzed the barbarity of American capitalism in plays like *Glen-garry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo*, in which he crafted a kind of poetry from the sludge of American slang. Mamet also made savage sport of feminism and “political correctness” in *Oleanna*, a biting satire about a woman student and her professor. Eve Ensler took a feminist commitment into new territory that blended comic intimacy and searing social commentary with her *Vagina Monologues*. The AIDS epidemic inspired Tony Kushner’s sensationally inventive *Angels in America*, a broad-ranging commentary, alternately hilarious and touching, about the condition of American life at century’s end. Cuban American Nilo Cruz won a Pulitzer Prize in 2003 for *Anna in the Tropics*, his evocative play about immigrant cigar-makers in 1930 Tampa. Film, the most characteristic American art form, continued to flourish, especially as a wave of younger filmmakers like George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Spike Lee, Quentin Tarantino, and the Coen brothers, as well as the innovative documentary artist Ken Burns, made their influence felt.

Architecture also benefited from the building boom of the postwar era. Old master Frank Lloyd Wright produced strikingly original designs, as in the round-walled Guggenheim Museum in New York. Louis Kahn employed stark geometric forms and basic building materials like brick and concrete to make beautiful, simple buildings. Eero Saarinen, the son of a Finnish immigrant, contributed a number of imaginative structures, including two Yale University residential colleges that evoked the atmosphere of an Italian hill town. Chinese-born I. M. Pei designed numerous graceful buildings on several college campuses, as well as the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. Philip Johnson artfully rendered huge edifices intimate in structures like New York City’s Seagram Building and the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center in Manhattan. “Postmodernists” such as Robert Venturi and Michael Graves, inspired by the decorative details of earlier historical styles, rejected the spare functionalism that had dominated modern architecture for much of the century. The flight from stark modernism took fanciful forms in Frank Gehry’s use of luminous, undulating sheets of metallic skin in the widely hailed

Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.



### The American Prospect

The American spirit pulsed with vitality in the early twenty-first century, but grave problems continued to plague the Republic. Women still fell short of first-class economic citizenship, and American society groped for ways to adapt the traditional family to the new realities of women’s work outside the home. A generation after the civil rights triumphs of the 1960s, full equality remained an elusive dream for countless Americans of color. Powerful foreign competitors challenged America’s premier economic status. As job opportunities shrank in some of the nation’s regions and expanded in others, as jobs shifted to cheaper labor markets abroad, and as giant corporations like Enron and WorldCom collapsed through corporate scandal, many Americans began to fear their economy as a treacherous landscape even as it offered some of them astounding prosperity. The alarmingly unequal distribution of wealth and income threatened to turn America into a society of haves and have-nots, mocking the ideals of democracy and breeding seething resentments along the economic frontier that divided rich from poor.

Environmental worries clouded the country’s future. Coal-fired electrical generating plants helped form acid rain and probably contributed to the greenhouse effect, an ominous warming in the planet’s temperature. The unsolved problem of radioactive waste disposal hampered the development of nuclear power plants. The planet was being drained of oil, and disastrous accidents like the grounding and subsequent oil spill of the giant tanker *Exxon Valdez* in 1989 in Alaska’s pristine Prince William Sound demonstrated the ecological risks of oil exploration and transportation at sea.

By the early twenty-first century, the once-lonely cries for alternative fuel sources had given way to mainstream public fascination with solar power and windmills, methane fuel, electric “hybrid” cars, and the pursuit of an affordable hydrogen fuel cell. Energy conservation remained another crucial but elusive strategy—much-heralded at the politician’s rostrum, but too rarely embodied in public policy, as witnessed in the Bush administration’s rejection of the Kyoto “global warming treaty” in 2001.

As the human family grew at an alarming rate on a shrinking globe, new challenges still faced America and its historical beliefs. The task of cleansing the earth of its abundant pollutants—including nuclear weapons—was one urgent mission confronting the American people in the new century. Another was seeking ways to resolve the ethnic and cultural conflicts that erupted with renewed virulence around the globe in the wake of the Cold War's end. At the same time, new opportunities beckoned in outer space and on inner-city streets, at the artist's easel and in the concert hall, at the inventor's bench and in the scientist's laboratory, and in the unending quest for social justice, individual fulfillment, and international peace.

The terrorist attack on America on September 11, 2001, posed yet another challenge to the United States. Shielded for over two centuries against assaults on its soil, it would now have to preserve its security in a world made smaller by global communication and transportation, without altering its fundamental democratic values and way of life. The great danger posed by terrorism was not that Al Qaeda or other foreign groups would seize control of the country or any portion of its territory. It was, rather, that in fighting terrorism, Americans would so compromise their freedoms at home and so isolate the country internationally that it would lose touch with its own guiding principles. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq made these difficulties clear. The challenge was to enhance national security without eroding democratic liberties, to protect the country's borders without pre-

venting the arrival of desirable immigrants, and to use military force wisely without undermining America's standing in the world.

In facing those challenges, the world's oldest republic had an extraordinary tradition of resilience and resourcefulness to draw on. Born as a revolutionary force in a world of conservatism, the United States stood in the twenty-first century as a conservative force in a world of revolution. It had long held aloft the banner of liberal democracy in a world wracked by revolutions of the right and left, including fascism, Nazism, and communism. Yet through it all, much that was truly revolutionary also remained a part of America's liberal democratic heritage, as its people pioneered in revolutions against colonialism, racism, sexism, ignorance, and poverty.

The dream of "making the world safe for democracy," articulated nearly a century earlier by Woodrow Wilson at the end of the First World War, gained a new poignancy after September 11, when Americans expressed a yearning for greater equality, opportunity, and democracy in the Middle East—all in the hope of diminishing the root causes of international terrorism. The capacity to nurture progress abroad, however, depended on the ability of Americans to improve their own country, and to do so in the midst of new threats to their own security. As Wilson wrote in 1893, long before he became president, "Democratic institutions are never done; they are like living tissue, always a-making. It is a strenuous thing, this of living the life of a free people."