

Chapter Three

TOWARD THE CITY ON A HILL

A brief history of the United States



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The first Europeans to reach North America were Icelandic Vikings, led by Leif Ericson, about the year 1000. Traces of their visit have been found in the Canadian province of Newfoundland, but the Vikings failed to establish a permanent settlement and soon lost contact with the new continent.

Five centuries later, the demand for Asian spices, textiles, and dyes spurred European navigators to dream of shorter routes between East and West. Acting on behalf of the Spanish crown, in 1492 the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus sailed west from Europe and landed on one of the Bahama Islands in the Caribbean Sea. Within 40 years, Spanish adventurers had carved out a huge empire in Central and South America.

THE COLONIAL ERA

The first successful English colony was founded at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. A few years later, English Puritans came to America to escape religious persecution for their opposition to the Church of England. In 1620, the Puritans founded Plymouth Colony in what later became Massachusetts. Plymouth was the second permanent British settlement in North America and the first in New England.

In New England the Puritans hoped to build a "city upon a hill" -- an ideal community. Ever since, Americans have viewed their country as a great experiment, a worthy model for other nations to follow. The Puritans believed that government should enforce God's morality, and they strictly punished heretics, adulterers, drunks, and violators of the Sabbath. In spite of their own quest for religious freedom, the Puritans practiced a form of intolerant moralism. In 1636 an English clergyman

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named Roger Williams left Massachusetts and founded the colony of Rhode Island, based on the principles of religious freedom and separation of church and state, two ideals that were later adopted by framers of the U.S. Constitution.

Colonists arrived from other European countries, but the English were far better established in America. By 1733 English settlers had founded 13 colonies along the Atlantic Coast, from New Hampshire in the North to Georgia in the South. Elsewhere in North America, the French controlled Canada and Louisiana, which included the vast Mississippi River watershed. France and England fought several wars during the 18th century, with North America being drawn into every one. The end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 left England in control of Canada and all of North America east of the Mississippi.

Soon afterwards England and its colonies were in conflict. The mother country imposed new taxes, in part to defray the cost of fighting the Seven Years' War, and expected Americans to lodge British soldiers in their homes. The colonists resented the taxes and resisted the quartering of soldiers. Insisting that they could be taxed only by their own colonial assemblies, the colonists rallied behind the slogan "no taxation without representation."

All the taxes, except one on tea, were removed, but in 1773 a group of patriots responded by staging the Boston Tea Party. Disguised as Indians, they boarded British merchant ships and dumped 342 crates of tea into Boston harbor. This provoked a crackdown by the British Parliament, including the closing of Boston harbor to shipping. Colonial leaders convened the First Continental Congress in 1774 to discuss the colonies' opposition to British rule. War broke out on April 19, 1775, when British soldiers confronted colonial rebels in Lexington, Massachusetts. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress adopted a Declaration of Independence.

At first the Revolutionary War went badly for the Americans. With few provisions and little training, American troops generally fought well, but were outnumbered and overpowered by the British. The turning point in the war came in 1777 when American soldiers defeated the British Army at Saratoga, New York. France had secretly been aiding the Americans, but was reluctant to ally itself openly until they had proved themselves in battle. Following the Americans' victory at Saratoga, France and America signed treaties of alliance,

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and France provided the Americans with troops and warships.

The last major battle of the American Revolution took place at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. A combined force of American and French troops surrounded the British and forced their surrender. Fighting continued in some areas for two more years, and the war officially ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, by which England recognized American independence.

A NEW NATION

The framing of the U.S. Constitution and the creation of the United States are covered in more detail in chapter 4. In essence, the Constitution alleviated Americans' fear of excessive central power by dividing government into three branches -- legislative (Congress), executive (the president and the federal agencies), and judicial (the federal courts) -- and by including 10 amendments known as the Bill of Rights to safeguard individual liberties. Continued uneasiness about the accumulation of power manifested itself in the differing political philosophies of two towering figures from the Revolutionary period. George Washington, the war's military hero and the first U.S. president, headed a party favoring a strong president and central government; Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, headed a party preferring to allot more power to the states, on the theory that they would be more accountable to the people.

Jefferson became the third president in 1801. Although he had intended to limit the president's power, political realities dictated otherwise. Among other forceful actions, in 1803 he purchased the vast Louisiana Territory from France, almost doubling the size of the United States. The Louisiana Purchase added more than 2 million square kilometers of territory and extended the country's borders as far west as the Rocky Mountains in Colorado.

SLAVERY AND THE CIVIL WAR

In the first quarter of the 19th century, the frontier of settlement moved west to the Mississippi River and beyond. In 1828 Andrew Jackson became the first "outsider" elected president: a man from the

frontier state of Tennessee, born into a poor family and outside the cultural traditions of the Atlantic seaboard.

Although on the surface the Jacksonian Era was one of optimism and energy, the young nation was entangled in a contradiction. The ringing words of the Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal," were meaningless for 1.5 million slaves. (For more on slavery and its aftermath, see chapters 1 and 4.)

In 1820 southern and northern politicians debated the question of whether slavery would be legal in the western territories. Congress reached a compromise: Slavery was permitted in the new state of Missouri and the Arkansas Territory but barred everywhere west and north of Missouri. The outcome of the Mexican War of 1846-48 brought more territory into American hands -- and with it the issue of whether to extend slavery. Another compromise, in 1850, admitted California as a free state, with the citizens of Utah and New Mexico being allowed to decide whether they wanted slavery within their borders or not (they did not).

But the issue continued to rankle. After Abraham Lincoln, a foe of slavery, was elected president in 1860, 11 states left the Union and proclaimed themselves an independent nation, the Confederate States of America: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina. The American Civil War had begun.

The Confederate Army did well in the early part of the war, and some of its commanders, especially General Robert E. Lee, were brilliant tacticians. But the Union had superior manpower and resources to draw upon. In the summer of 1863 Lee took a gamble by marching his troops north into Pennsylvania. He met a Union army at Gettysburg, and the largest battle ever fought on American soil ensued. After three days of desperate fighting, the Confederates were defeated. At the same time, on the Mississippi River, Union General Ulysses S. Grant captured the city of Vicksburg, giving the North control of the entire Mississippi Valley and splitting the Confederacy in two.

Two years later, after a long campaign involving forces commanded by Lee and Grant, the Confederates surrendered. The Civil War was the most traumatic episode in American history. But it resolved two matters that had vexed Americans since 1776. It put an end to slavery,

and it decided that the country was not a collection of semi-independent states but an indivisible whole.

THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, depriving America of a leader uniquely qualified by background and temperament to heal the wounds left by the Civil War. His successor, Andrew Johnson, was a southerner who had remained loyal to the Union during the war. Northern members of Johnson's own party (Republican) set in motion a process to remove him from office for allegedly acting too leniently toward former Confederates. Johnson's acquittal was an important victory for the principle of separation of powers: A president should not be removed from office because Congress disagrees with his policies, but only if he has committed, in the words of the Constitution, "treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

Within a few years after the end of the Civil War, the United States became a leading industrial power, and shrewd businessmen made great fortunes. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; by 1900 the United States had more rail mileage than all of Europe. The petroleum industry prospered, and John D. Rockefeller of the Standard Oil Company became one of the richest men in America. Andrew Carnegie, who started out as a poor Scottish immigrant, built a vast empire of steel mills. Textile mills multiplied in the South, and meat-packing plants sprang up in Chicago, Illinois. An electrical industry flourished as Americans made use of a series of inventions: the telephone, the light bulb, the phonograph, the alternating-current motor and transformer, motion pictures. In Chicago, architect Louis Sullivan used steel-frame construction to fashion America's distinctive contribution to the modern city: the skyscraper.

But unrestrained economic growth brought dangers. To limit competition, railroads merged and set standardized shipping rates. Trusts -- huge combinations of corporations -- tried to establish monopoly control over some industries, notably oil. These giant enterprises could produce goods efficiently and sell them cheaply, but they could also fix prices and destroy competitors. To counteract them, the federal government took action. The Interstate Commerce Commission was created in 1887 to control railroad rates. The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 banned trusts, mergers, and business

agreements "in restraint of trade."

Industrialization brought with it the rise of organized labor. The American Federation of Labor, founded in 1886, was a coalition of trade unions for skilled laborers. The late 19th century was a period of heavy immigration, and many of the workers in the new industries were foreign-born. For American farmers, however, times were hard. Food prices were falling, and farmers had to bear the costs of high shipping rates, expensive mortgages, high taxes, and tariffs on consumer goods.

With the exception of the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, American territory had remained fixed since 1848. In the 1890s a new spirit of expansion took hold. The United States followed the lead of northern European nations in asserting a duty to "civilize" the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. After American newspapers published lurid accounts of atrocities in the Spanish colony of Cuba, the United States and Spain went to war in 1898. When the war was over, the United States had gained a number of possessions from Spain: Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. In an unrelated action, the United States also acquired the Hawaiian Islands.

Yet Americans, who had themselves thrown off the shackles of empire, were not comfortable with administering one. In 1902 American troops left Cuba, although the new republic was required to grant naval bases to the United States. The Philippines obtained limited self-government in 1907 and complete independence in 1946. Puerto Rico became a self-governing commonwealth within the United States, and Hawaii became a state in 1959 (as did Alaska).

THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

While Americans were venturing abroad, they were also taking a fresh look at social problems at home. Despite the signs of prosperity, up to half of all industrial workers still lived in poverty. New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco could be proud of their museums, universities, and public libraries -- and ashamed of their slums. The prevailing economic dogma had been *laissez faire*: let the government interfere with commerce as little as possible. About 1900 the Progressive Movement arose to reform society and individuals through government action. The movement's supporters were primarily

economists, sociologists, technicians, and civil servants who sought scientific, cost-effective solutions to political problems.

Social workers went into the slums to establish settlement houses, which provided the poor with health services and recreation. Prohibitionists demanded an end to the sale of liquor, partly to prevent the suffering that alcoholic husbands inflicted on their wives and children. In the cities, reform politicians fought corruption, regulated public transportation, and built municipally owned utilities. States passed laws restricting child labor, limiting workdays, and providing compensation for injured workers.

Some Americans favored more radical ideologies. The Socialist Party, led by Eugene V. Debs, advocated a peaceful, democratic transition to a state-run economy. But socialism never found a solid footing in the United States -- the party's best showing in a presidential race was 6 percent of the vote in 1912.

WAR AND PEACE

When World War I erupted in Europe in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson urged a policy of strict American neutrality. Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare against all ships bound for Allied ports undermined that position. When Congress declared war on Germany in 1917, the American army was a force of only 200,000 soldiers. Millions of men had to be drafted, trained, and shipped across the submarine-infested Atlantic. A full year passed before the U.S. Army was ready to make a significant contribution to the war effort.

By the fall of 1918, Germany's position had become hopeless. Its armies were retreating in the face of a relentless American buildup. In October Germany asked for peace, and an armistice was declared on November 11. In 1919 Wilson himself went to Versailles to help draft the peace treaty. Although he was cheered by crowds in the Allied capitals, at home his international outlook was less popular. His idea of a League of Nations was included in the Treaty of Versailles, but the U.S. Senate did not ratify the treaty, and the United States did not participate in the league.

The majority of Americans did not mourn the defeated treaty. They

turned inward, and the United States withdrew from European affairs. At the same time, Americans were becoming hostile to foreigners in their midst. In 1919 a series of terrorist bombings produced the "Red Scare." Under the authority of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, political meetings were raided and several hundred foreign-born political radicals were deported, even though most of them were innocent of any crime. In 1921 two Italian-born anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were convicted of murder on the basis of shaky evidence. Intellectuals protested, but in 1927 the two men were electrocuted. Congress enacted immigration limits in 1921 and tightened them further in 1924 and 1929. These restrictions favored immigrants from Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries.

The 1920s were an extraordinary and confusing time, when hedonism coexisted with puritanical conservatism. It was the age of Prohibition: In 1920 a constitutional amendment outlawed the sale of alcoholic beverages. Yet drinkers cheerfully evaded the law in thousands of "speakeasies" (illegal bars), and gangsters made illicit fortunes in liquor. It was also the Roaring Twenties, the age of jazz and spectacular silent movies and such fads as flagpole-sitting and goldfish-swallowing. The Ku Klux Klan, a racist organization born in the South after the Civil War, attracted new followers and terrorized blacks, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. At the same time, a Catholic, New York Governor Alfred E. Smith, was a Democratic candidate for president.

For big business, the 1920s were golden years. The United States was now a consumer society, with booming markets for radios, home appliances, synthetic textiles, and plastics. One of the most admired men of the decade was Henry Ford, who had introduced the assembly line into automobile factories. Ford could pay high wages and still earn enormous profits by mass-producing the Model T, a car that millions of buyers could afford. For a moment, it seemed that Americans had the Midas touch.

But the superficial prosperity masked deep problems. With profits soaring and interest rates low, plenty of money was available for investment. Much of it, however, went into reckless speculation in the stock market. Frantic bidding pushed prices far above stock shares' real value. Investors bought stocks "on margin," borrowing up to 90 percent of the purchase price. The bubble burst in 1929. The stock market crashed, triggering a worldwide depression.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

By 1932 thousands of American banks and over 100,000 businesses had failed. Industrial production was cut in half, wages had decreased 60 percent, and one out of every four workers was unemployed. That year Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president on the platform of "a New Deal for the American people."

Roosevelt's jaunty self-confidence galvanized the nation. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he said at his inauguration. He followed up these words with decisive action. Within three months -- the historic "Hundred Days" -- Roosevelt had rushed through Congress a great number of laws to help the economy recover. Such new agencies as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration created millions of jobs by undertaking the construction of roads, bridges, airports, parks, and public buildings. Later the Social Security Act set up contributory old-age and survivors' pensions.

Roosevelt's New Deal programs did not end the Depression. Although the economy improved, full recovery had to await the defense buildup preceding America's entry into World War II.

WORLD WAR II

Again neutrality was the initial American response to the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939. But the bombing of Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii by the Japanese in December 1941 brought the United States into the war, first against Japan and then against its allies, Germany and Italy.

American, British, and Soviet war planners agreed to concentrate on defeating Germany first. British and American forces landed in North Africa in November 1942, proceeded to Sicily and the Italian mainland in 1943, and liberated Rome on June 4, 1944. Two days later -- D-Day -- Allied forces landed in Normandy. Paris was liberated on August 24, and by September American units had crossed the German border. The Germans finally surrendered on May 5, 1945.

The war against Japan came to a swift end in August of 1945, when

President Harry Truman ordered the use of atomic bombs against the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nearly 200,000 civilians were killed. Although the matter can still provoke heated discussion, the argument in favor of dropping the bombs was that casualties on both sides would have been greater if the Allies had been forced to invade Japan.

THE COLD WAR

A new international congress, the United Nations, came into being after the war, and this time the United States joined. Soon tensions developed between the United States and its wartime ally the Soviet Union. Although Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had promised to support free elections in all the liberated nations of Europe, Soviet forces imposed Communist dictatorships in eastern Europe. Germany became a divided country, with a western zone under joint British, French, and American occupation and an eastern zone under Soviet occupation. In the spring of 1948 the Soviets sealed off West Berlin in an attempt to starve the isolated city into submission. The western powers responded with a massive airlift of food and fuel until the Soviets lifted the blockade in May 1949. A month earlier the United States had allied with Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

On June 25, 1950, armed with Soviet weapons and acting with Stalin's approval, North Korea's army invaded South Korea. Truman immediately secured a commitment from the United Nations to defend South Korea. The war lasted three years, and the final settlement left Korea divided.

Soviet control of eastern Europe, the Korean War, and the Soviet development of atomic and hydrogen bombs instilled fear in Americans. Some believed that the nation's new vulnerability was the work of traitors from within. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy asserted in the early 1950s that the State Department and the U.S. Army were riddled with Communists. McCarthy was eventually discredited. In the meantime, however, careers had been destroyed, and the American people had all but lost sight of a cardinal American virtue: toleration of political dissent.

From 1945 until 1970 the United States enjoyed a long period of

economic growth, interrupted only by mild and brief recessions. For the first time a majority of Americans enjoyed a comfortable standard of living. In 1960, 55 percent of all households owned washing machines, 77 percent owned cars, 90 percent had television sets, and nearly all had refrigerators. At the same time, the nation was moving slowly to establish racial justice.

In 1960 John F. Kennedy was elected president. Young, energetic, and handsome, he promised to "get the country moving again" after the eight-year presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the aging World War II general. In October 1962 Kennedy was faced with what turned out to be the most drastic crisis of the Cold War. The Soviet Union had been caught installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, close enough to reach American cities in a matter of minutes. Kennedy imposed a naval blockade on the island. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev ultimately agreed to remove the missiles, in return for an American promise not to invade Cuba.

In April 1961 the Soviets capped a series of triumphs in space by sending the first man into orbit around the Earth. President Kennedy responded with a promise that Americans would walk on the moon before the decade was over. This promise was fulfilled in July of 1969, when astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped out of the Apollo 11 spacecraft and onto the moon's surface.

Kennedy did not live to see this culmination. He had been assassinated in 1963. He was not a universally popular president, but his death was a terrible shock to the American people. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, managed to push through Congress a number of new laws establishing social programs. Johnson's "War on Poverty" included preschool education for poor children, vocational training for dropouts from school, and community service for slum youths.

During his six years in office, Johnson became preoccupied with the Vietnam War. By 1968, 500,000 American troops were fighting in that small country, previously little known to most of them. Although politicians tended to view the war as part of a necessary effort to check communism on all fronts, a growing number of Americans saw no vital American interest in what happened to Vietnam. Demonstrations protesting American involvement broke out on college campuses, and there were violent clashes between students and police. Antiwar sentiment spilled over into a wide range of protests against injustice

and discrimination.

Stung by his increasing unpopularity, Johnson decided not to run for a second full term. Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968. He pursued a policy of Vietnamization, gradually replacing American soldiers with Vietnamese. In 1973 he signed a peace treaty with North Vietnam and brought American soldiers home. Nixon achieved two other diplomatic breakthroughs: re-establishing U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China and negotiating the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty with the Soviet Union. In 1972 he easily won re-election.

During that presidential campaign, however, five men had been arrested for breaking into Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate office building in Washington, D.C. Journalists investigating the incident discovered that the burglars had been employed by Nixon's re-election committee. The White House made matters worse by trying to conceal its connection with the break-in. Eventually, tape recordings made by the president himself revealed that he had been involved in the cover-up. By the summer of 1974, it was clear that Congress was about to impeach and convict him. On August 9, Richard Nixon became the only U.S. president to resign from office.

DECADES OF CHANGE

After World War II the presidency had alternated between Democrats and Republicans, but, for the most part, Democrats had held majorities in the Congress -- in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. A string of 26 consecutive years of Democratic control was broken in 1980, when the Republicans gained a majority in the Senate; at the same time, Republican Ronald Reagan was elected president. This change marked the onset of a volatility that has characterized American voting patterns ever since.

Whatever their attitudes toward Reagan's policies, most Americans credited him with a capacity for instilling pride in their country and a sense of optimism about the future. If there was a central theme to his domestic policies, it was that the federal government had become too big and federal taxes too high.

Despite a growing federal budget deficit, in 1983 the U.S. economy entered into one of the longest periods of sustained growth since World War II. The Reagan administration suffered a defeat in the 1986 elections, however, when Democrats regained control of the Senate. The most serious issue of the day was the revelation that the United States had secretly sold arms to Iran in an attempt to win freedom for American hostages held in Lebanon and to finance antigovernment forces in Nicaragua at a time when Congress had prohibited such aid. Despite these revelations, Reagan continued to enjoy strong popularity throughout his second term in office.

His successor in 1988, Republican George Bush, benefited from Reagan's popularity and continued many of his policies. When Iraq invaded oil-rich Kuwait in 1990, Bush put together a multinational coalition that liberated Kuwait early in 1991.

By 1992, however, the American electorate had become restless again. Voters elected Bill Clinton, a Democrat, president, only to turn around two years later and give Republicans their first majority in both the House and Senate in 40 years. Meanwhile, several perennial debates had broken out anew -- between advocates of a strong federal government and believers in decentralization of power, between advocates of prayer in public schools and defenders of separation of church and state, between those who emphasize swift and sure punishment of criminals and those who seek to address the underlying causes of crime. Complaints about the influence of money on political campaigns inspired a movement to limit the number of terms elected officials could serve. This and other discontents with the system led to the formation of the strongest Third-Party movement in generations, led by Texas businessman H. Ross Perot.

Although the economy was strong in the mid-1990s, two phenomena were troubling many Americans. Corporations were resorting more and more to a process known as downsizing: trimming the work force to cut costs despite the hardships this inflicted on workers. And in many industries the gap between the annual compensations of corporate executives and common laborers had become enormous. Even the majority of Americans who enjoy material comfort worry about a perceived decline in the quality of life, in the strength of the family, in neighborliness and civility. Americans probably remain the most optimistic people in the world, but with the century drawing to a close, opinion polls showed that trait in shorter supply than usual.

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