

Chapter 55

Politics and Society in the “Me Decade”

How should historians characterize the 1970s?

55.1 Introduction

On July 4, 1976, the United States celebrated the **bicentennial**—or 200th anniversary—of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Across the nation, Americans marked the day with parades, picnics, and fireworks displays. But the celebration surpassed the usual Independence Day events. It lasted most of the year. The U.S. Mint issued coins with bicentennial designs. Television networks featured programs that explored the events of the nation’s first two centuries. A flag with a special bicentennial logo flew throughout the year.

To many Americans, the bicentennial year brought a welcome sense of national pride. The celebrations, with their focus on the nation’s founding ideals, helped them move past the trauma of Vietnam and the disillusionment of Watergate. Others, however, reacted differently. As they looked back on the nation’s founding, they worried that the United States had lost its sense of purpose.

In the bicentennial year, a journalist named Tom Wolfe captured such concerns in his essay, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening.” In it, Wolfe wrote of changes he had seen in American life since the end of the 1960s. In that decade, he noted, idealistic Americans had worked hard to end racism, fight poverty, and create a more just society. During the 1970s, however, the drive for social change had been replaced with a quest for self-improvement and personal fulfillment. “We are now in the Me Decade,” he wrote, “seeing the upward roll of . . . the third great religious wave in American history.” The focus of this latest “great awakening,” Wolfe observed, was “the most fascinating subject on earth: Me.”

Wolfe’s characterization of the 1970s as the “Me Decade” stuck. Today, however, most historians view the 1970s as being much more complex than the label “Me Decade” suggests.



Gary Dahl invented the pet rock as a joke in 1975. His joke became a moneymaker when he sold a million pet rocks in just a few months. Dahl claimed that each rock had been tested for obedience before being chosen to become a pet rock.

◀ A bicentennial celebration at Independence Hall in Philadelphia



Gerald Ford's Whip Inflation Now campaign urged Americans to take voluntary action to improve the economy. Some Americans wore WIN buttons to show their support for the plan. In the end, however, WIN did little to slow inflation or improve the economy.

55.2 A Time of Economic and Political Malaise

When Gerald Ford took office as president in 1974, he inherited a number of political problems. Although the United States had withdrawn from Vietnam, the war there raged on. Ford's decision to pardon Richard Nixon had divided the nation. In addition, the economy continued to suffer from stagflation. In a speech to Congress, Ford explained just how dire the situation was. "Inflation, our public enemy number one, will, unless whipped," he stated, "destroy our country, our homes, our liberties, our property, and finally our national pride, as surely as any well-armed wartime enemy."

President Ford Tries to "Whip Inflation Now" The inflation that dragged down the economy in the 1970s had many causes. One was President Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam while also launching a War on Poverty. Both military and welfare spending tend to be inflationary, because they put more money into people's pockets without increasing the supply of goods those dollars can buy. When too many dollars chase too few goods, prices rise.

The **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)** made matters worse. Formed in 1960, OPEC is an association of nations that depend on oil sales for their national income. In its early years, OPEC priced oil at \$2 to \$3 per barrel. The 1973 oil embargo, however, revealed the dependence of many countries on imported oil. As a result, OPEC began to increase oil prices. By 1976, the price of a barrel of oil had jumped to \$12.

Soaring oil prices hurt the U.S. economy. Products that used oil as a raw material became more costly to produce. As fuel prices went up, so did the cost of moving goods from farm or factory to consumers. Stunned by high gas prices, drivers stopped buying American-made gas-guzzlers for a while. As sales plummeted, auto manufacturers laid off more than 225,000 workers in 1974.

Ford tried to beat down rising prices with a crusade called Whip Inflation Now (WIN). He cut federal spending while urging Americans to conserve energy and practice thrift. "Clean up your plate before you leave the table," the president advised. "Guard your health." Unfortunately, WIN was not effective. Prices continued to rise, growing 11 percent in 1975. The unemployment rate grew more than 8 percent—the highest it had been since the Depression's end.

An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter The 1976 presidential election pitted Ford against former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. Carter appealed to voters as a Washington outsider untouched by scandal. He promised Americans, "I will never lie to you."

Neither candidate generated much excitement. As Election Day neared, people talked of a "clothespin vote," a phrase that implies "hold your nose and vote for one or the other." Only 53 percent of eligible voters went to the polls—the lowest turnout since 1948. Carter won, but by a narrow margin.

Once in the White House, Carter maintained his outsider status. Rather than hiring experienced Washington insiders, he surrounded himself with staff from Georgia. Nor did he establish close relations with Congress. As a result, his efforts to enact such reforms as a national health insurance system went nowhere.

Carter's Energy Program: "The Moral Equivalent of War" Convinced that the era of cheap energy had ended, the new president called on Americans to "face the fact that the energy shortage is permanent." Soon after taking office in 1977, Carter put forward a plan to end the nation's dependence on imported oil. He called this effort the "moral equivalent of war."

Carter's energy plan centered on conservation. "It is the cheapest, most practical way to meet our energy needs," he told Congress, "and to reduce our dependence on foreign oil." His plan would penalize energy waste while encouraging energy efficiency. Lawmakers, however, were slow to respond to it. Reporters began to refer to Carter's "moral equivalent of war" as MEOW, revealing their feeling that Congress would not take it seriously.

Late in 1978, Congress finally passed a watered-down version of Carter's original plan. This **National Energy Act** offered **tax credits** as incentives to people who conserved energy by insulating their homes or investing in alternative energy sources, such as solar energy panels. Tax credits reduce the amount of taxes a taxpayer owes to the government.

While the National Energy Act helped make the nation more energy efficient, it did not end U.S. dependence on foreign oil. In 1979, a second energy crisis disrupted life across the country. This energy shortage was triggered by a revolution in Iran that led that country to stop exporting oil. Over the next year, oil prices rose to a staggering \$39.50 per barrel. Long lines reappeared at gas stations, and fistfights broke out among some motorists who were waiting in line for gas.

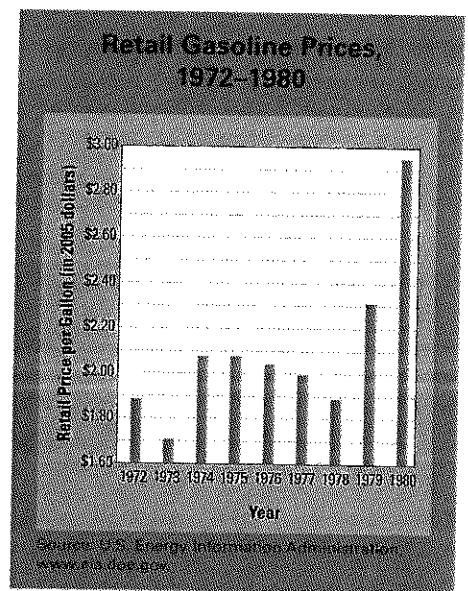
Americans Face a "Crisis of Confidence" With his approval rating low, at 25 percent, Carter planned to speak to the nation once more about conserving energy. However, after a week of discussions with various advisers, he changed his mind. "I want to speak to you first tonight about a subject even more serious than energy or inflation," Carter told the nation in a televised address.

I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy . . . It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of unity of purpose for our Nation . . .

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

—Jimmy Carter, "Crisis of Confidence" speech, July 15, 1979

Carter's address, which the media called his "malaise speech"—malaise meaning "a feeling of general unease"—backfired. "There's nothing wrong with the American people," responded newspaper editorials. "Maybe the problem's in the White House, maybe we need new leadership to guide us."



The effects of the first energy crisis in 1973–1974 and of a second one in 1979 can be seen on this graph. As the supply of imported oil dropped, the price of gasoline spiked upward. Automakers began equipping automobile gas tanks with locks to prevent theft during such fuel shortages.

55.3 President Carter's Approach to Foreign Policy

Once Carter took office in 1976, it was clear that his approach to foreign policy differed sharply from Richard Nixon's *realpolitik*. Whereas Nixon had prided himself on his realism, Carter applied his idealism to foreign affairs. He insisted that the government not separate foreign policy from "questions of justice, equity, and human rights." "Fairness, and not force," he urged, "should lie at the heart of our dealings with nations of the world."

Promoting Justice, Equity, and Human Rights Carter worked hard to put his ideals into practice. In some areas, he saw success. For example, he established a more equitable relationship with the nation of Panama. Panamanians had long regarded a 1903 treaty between the two countries as unjust, as it gave the United States permanent control of the Panama Canal. In 1977, Carter negotiated a new treaty that would return control of the canal to Panama in 1999. Despite strong objections, the Senate ratified the Panama Canal Treaty in 1978.

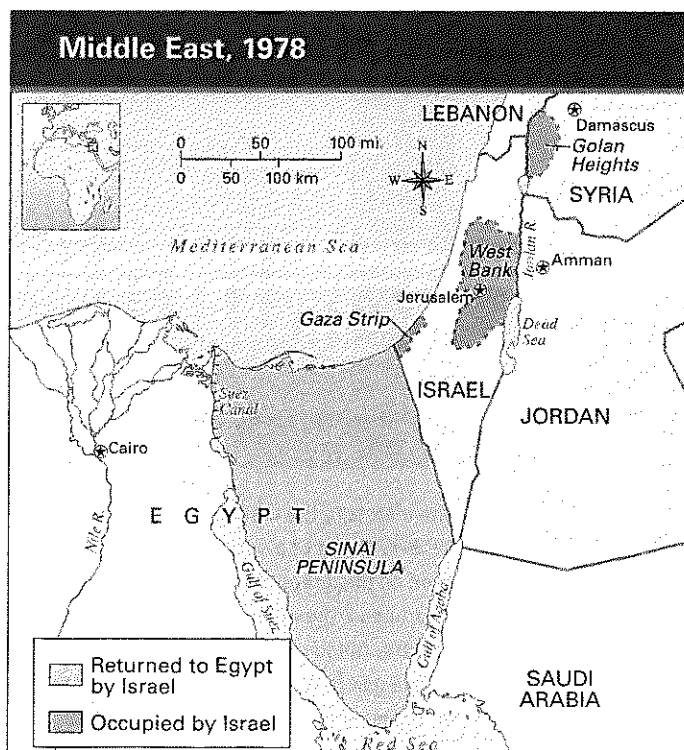
In the area of human rights, Carter's record proved to be more mixed. He came into office determined to end the Cold War policy of supporting dictators who opposed communism even if they abused human rights. When leftist rebels ousted an anticommunist dictator from Nicaragua in 1979, Carter stood by his new policy and did not intervene. However, he did continue to support dictators with poor human rights records in other parts of the world—such as the Philippines and Indonesia—that he viewed as vital to American interests.

The Camp David Accords ended hostilities between Egypt and Israel. Israel agreed to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt over the course of four years. In exchange, Egypt agreed to recognize Israel's right to exist.

A Step Toward Middle East Peace: The Camp David Accords Carter achieved his greatest foreign policy success in the Middle East. In 1978, he invited the leaders of Egypt and Israel to peace talks at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland. Just five years earlier, Egypt and Israel had been adversaries in the Yom Kippur War. During that conflict, Israel had gained control of lands that had previously belonged to its neighbors. These occupied territories included Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat conversed for 13 tense days. Finally, they reached an agreement known as the **Camp David Accords**. The Accords provided a framework for peace between the two countries. Israel agreed to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, while Egypt agreed to establish normal diplomatic relations with Israel. This made Egypt the first Arab country to formally recognize Israel's right to exist, which Arab nations had opposed since Israel's establishment in 1948.

In 1979, Sadat and Begin together received the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to end hostilities between their countries. When presenting the award, the chairman of the Nobel Committee spoke of Carter's contribution. Carter, he said, was "the master builder responsible for the bridge" that brought "two one-time enemies" together to talk of peace.



The Death of Détente Between the U.S. and USSR Both presidents Nixon and Ford had pursued a policy of détente toward the USSR. In contrast, Carter openly criticized the Soviet Union's human rights record. Still, he cooperated with Soviet leaders enough to negotiate a second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II). "Peace will not be assured," he said in a speech before the United Nations, "until the weapons of war are finally put away."

Any remnants of détente vanished in 1979, when Soviet troops marched into Afghanistan. The USSR invaded this neighbor to help its failing communist government handle a rebellion. Calling the invasion the "most serious threat to world peace since World War II," Carter responded by promoting a boycott of the Olympic Games that would be held in Moscow the following summer.

A Hostage Crisis in Iran Under Carter, the Nixon Doctrine fared little better than did détente. Early in the 1970s, as part of that policy, the United States had increased military aid to Iran. In return, it had expected Iran's royal ruler, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, to help maintain stability in the Persian Gulf region. Carter continued to support the Shah, despite the leader's poor human rights record. However, in January 1979, a revolution swept through Iran. Under a religious leader, the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, the revolutionary army declared Iran a republic. It forced the Shah from the throne and into exile. Khomeini established a new government based on a strict understanding of Islamic principles.

Later that year, Carter allowed the exiled Shah to enter the United States for medical treatment. This decision enraged many Iranians. On November 4, 1979, militant students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, Iran's capital. In violation of international law, which protects diplomats, the students took 66 Americans hostage. They paraded the hostages through the streets of Tehran, while the angry crowd shouted, "Death to Carter!"

For more than a year, Carter struggled to bring the hostages home. Appeals to the United Nations and U.S. allies for help in securing the hostages' release accomplished little. In April 1980, Carter attempted a military rescue. The mission failed when two helicopters had engine trouble, a third was damaged while landing, and a fourth crashed, killing eight Americans.

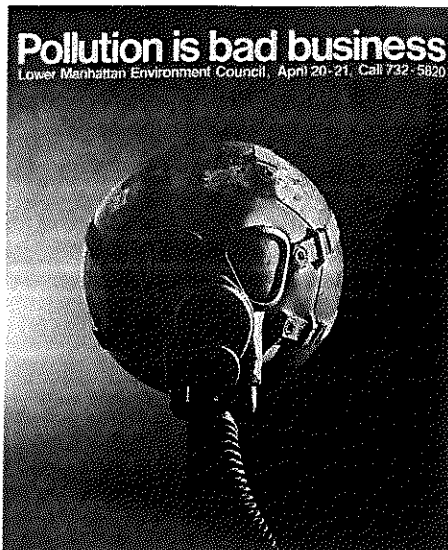
The hostage crisis angered Americans. Some directed their outrage at Iran. Texans displayed signs urging, "Don't buy Iranian oil." Other Americans blamed Carter's "fairness, not force" approach to foreign policy. "Wild as he is," stated former energy secretary James Schlesinger, "the Ayatollah Khomeini would not have touched the Soviet embassy." Fifty-two of the hostages were not released until Carter left office in January 1981. By then, they had endured 444 days in captivity.



President Carter, Menachem Begin of Israel, and Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt celebrate the signing of the Camp David Accords. The agreement marked a high point in Carter's efforts to bring peace to the Middle East.

The Iran hostage crisis began when Iranian students seized Americans working in the U.S. embassy in Tehran. As the crisis wore on, many Americans criticized Carter for not bringing the hostages home. To them, his inability to free the hostages symbolized a loss of U.S. power.





This antipollution poster was created for the first Earth Day in 1970. Senator Gaylord Nelson, who organized the event, commented, "Earth Day worked because of the spontaneous response at the grassroots level . . . That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day. It organized itself." Earth Day is still celebrated each year.

55.4 Protecting the Environment

On April 22, 1970, Americans celebrated the first **Earth Day**. Across the country, nearly 20 million people came together to show their concern for a healthy environment. Some held marches. Others organized cleanup projects. "The Establishment sees this as a great big antilitter campaign," observed George Brown, a congressman from California. But Earth Day was far more than that. By 1970, polls showed that for many Americans, the condition of the environment had become the nation's most pressing domestic issue.

An Environmental Movement Emerges The success of Earth Day signaled the emergence of a grassroots environmental movement. Some groups, such as the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, had existed for many years. The Sierra Club had come into being in 1892 under the leadership of John Muir and other conservationists. The club's original purpose was to enjoy and protect the mountains of the West. Over time, it expanded this mission to include preserving wilderness and protecting the environment across the nation. As a result, the club's membership grew. In 1970, the Sierra Club had 100,000 members. By the end of the decade, membership had swelled to nearly 200,000.

New organizations also sprang up in response to environmental concerns. Some dealt with local issues, such as cleaning up rivers or starting recycling programs. Others dealt with national and even global issues. A group called Zero Population Growth (ZPG) that formed in 1968 aimed to raise awareness of the connection between rapid population growth and environmental destruction. With its slogan "Stop at Two," ZPG encouraged families to stay small.

A Decade of Environmental Legislation In response to growing public concern, Congress enacted a number of environmental laws during the 1970s. Soon after the first Earth Day in 1970, it approved legislation to create the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This agency's mission was to repair damage already done to the natural environment and to prevent new problems. The EPA grew quickly. By the end of the decade, it had become the government's largest regulatory agency, with more than 10,000 employees.

Air pollution was a major concern during this decade. In 1970, Congress amended the Clean Air Act of 1963. The updated act set stricter standards for emissions from automobiles, factories, and power plants. In 1977, lawmakers amended the act once more. This time they strengthened air-quality standards.

Congress also dealt with water pollution. In 1969, Americans had been shocked when the polluted Cuyahoga River burst into flames in Cleveland, Ohio. The **Clean Water Act** of 1972 limited the amount of sewage and other pollutants flowing into waterways. The **Safe Drinking Water Act** of 1974 allowed the EPA to regulate the quality of public drinking water.

The EPA also took steps to deal with another source of water pollution, **acid rain**. Acid rain is precipitation that contains acid as a result of water vapor mixing with molecules of sulfur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen in the atmosphere. These pollutants are released into the atmosphere by automobiles, factories, and power plants that burn fossil fuels. Acid rain can harm plants and animals. It also corrodes buildings and other stone structures.

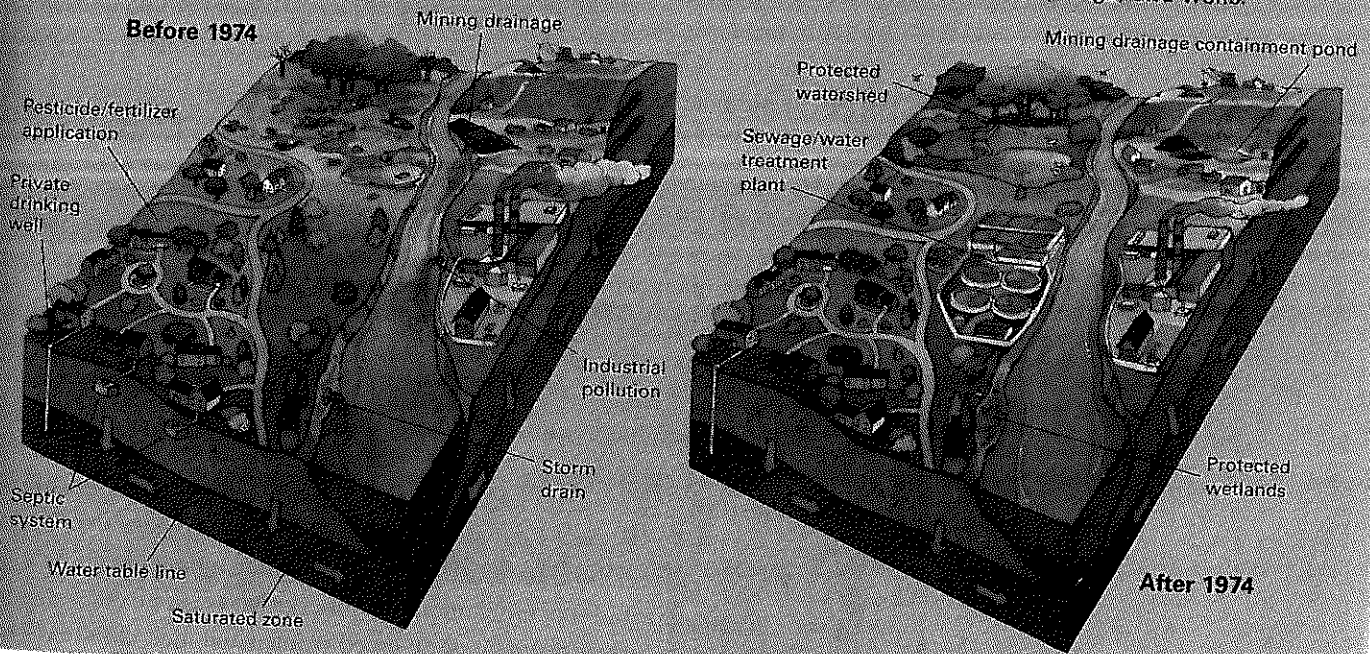
During the 1970s, the EPA began requiring cars to have reduced pollution. By 1975, manufacturers were equipping each car with a catalytic converter, a device that removes pollutants from the car's exhaust. By 1979, the EPA had also required the use of smokestack scrubbers. These removed pollutants from the exhaust of coal-fired power plants. This technology was widely adopted during the 1980s.

Environmental Disasters Fuel Public Concern Two well-publicized disasters underscored public concern about environmental hazards during the 1970s. The first occurred in Love Canal, a neighborhood in Niagara, New York. People in Love Canal unknowingly resided atop a chemical waste dump, which exposed them to poisons. As a result, residents developed unusually high rates of cancer and birth defects. When officials discovered the cause of the health problems in 1978, Love Canal became a media event. Eventually, the federal government relocated 800 families to safer areas. Meanwhile, Congress passed laws requiring companies to clean up their toxic waste areas.

The second disaster of the decade occurred at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station. On March 28, 1979, the nuclear power plant suffered a partial meltdown. The situation was brought under control. However, some radioactive gases did escape into the atmosphere. The **Three Mile Island accident** convinced many Americans that nuclear power plants posed an unacceptable risk to people and the natural environment. As a result, no new nuclear power plants have been built in the United States since 1979.

Why Was the Safe Drinking Water Act Needed?

Clean drinking water is essential for human health. By the 1970s, however, the water supply in some areas had become so polluted by chemicals, sewage, or pesticides that it was unsafe to drink. The Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 was designed to protect public health by setting national standards for safe drinking water. Since 1974, the law has been amended to protect drinking water at its sources, such as rivers, lakes, springs, and wells.





During the 1970s, more and more women embarked on careers in field that had previously been considered “men’s work.” By the end of the decade, it was no longer surprising to see women working at construction sites, delivering weather reports on television, or defending clients in the courtroom.

55.5 Women Continue Their Struggle for Equality

On September 20, 1973, professional tennis player Billie Jean King took on an aging former Wimbledon champion named Bobby Riggs. Billed as “The Battle of the Sexes,” this was no ordinary tennis match. Riggs proudly admitted to being a **male chauvinist**, a person who believes men are superior to women. He boasted that at age 55, he could beat King, who was, after all, only a woman. In a match that 50 million people watched on television, King proved Riggs wrong and easily won the match. To many viewers, King’s victory symbolized the gains women were making not only in sports but also in many other realms.

Women Challenge Gender Segregation in the Workplace During the 1970s, record numbers of women entered professions that men had traditionally dominated. The decade saw a 144 percent increase in the number of female accountants and a doubling of female chemists. In 1972, only 4 percent of the nation’s lawyers were women. By 1980, that figure had risen to 13 percent. By the same year, one in five medical students was female.

As encouraging as these numbers were, they did not tell the whole story. In the 1970s, most women still toiled in a workplace segregated by gender. Men did certain jobs, and women did others. In addition, women’s jobs usually paid less than men’s jobs did. For example, nurses, most of whom were women, earned less than truck drivers, most of whom were men.

To address this inequality, feminists in the late 1970s began a campaign for what they called **comparable worth**. Advocates of comparable worth argued that jobs typically held by women, such as nursing positions, should command as much pay as those jobs typically held by men that required comparable education and training. If this change took place, a highly trained nurse would make more money than a less-skilled truck driver. These arguments convinced many employers to examine their pay practices. Some agreed to increase pay for certain jobs traditionally held by women.

Feminists also addressed barriers that prevented women from entering higher-paying jobs. One was the reluctance of men who controlled most workplaces to promote women to management. Women described this barrier as a “glass ceiling” that allowed them to rise only so far in a company but no higher. Eventually, women began to break through this glass ceiling, proving not only that they could take on management tasks, but also that a man could work for a female boss. Another obstacle was a shortage of affordable childcare. Without such care, many women took on part-time or less-demanding jobs in order to have time to watch over their children. Such jobs usually paid less than full-time or more demanding work. Feminists lobbied for employers and government officials to establish and help fund childcare centers for working parents.

The lack of affordable childcare was part of a larger problem referred to as the “feminization of poverty.” Poverty rates for all Americans had declined during the 1960s. However, the decline was more dramatic for men than for women. By the 1970s, women were much more likely to be poor than men were. This was especially true for single mothers with children to support.

Feminists addressed this problem in a number of ways. For example, they worked to achieve better treatment of divorced women and their children. They

did so by pushing government officials to ensure that divorced mothers received child-support payments that they had been awarded as part of their divorce settlements. They also sought stricter penalties for divorced fathers who did not meet financial obligations to their families.

Women Increase Their Political Clout To bring about such reforms, many women threw themselves into politics. During the 1970s, a growing number of women voted, sought public office, and worked for changes in public policy. The **National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC)**, formed in 1971 by feminist leaders, encouraged such activism. The new organization raised money to get more women elected to office. The NWPC also helped fund male candidates who took a strong stand on women's issues.

Women quickly became more active and influential in their political parties. In 1968, only 13 percent of the delegates at the Democratic National Convention were women. By 1972, due to the efforts of the NWPC, women accounted for 40 percent of delegates. Women in the Republican Party also increased their representation at national conventions—from 17 percent of delegates in 1968 to 30 percent by 1972.

Women also gained influence with elected officials by voting in larger numbers than men did. As a result, a candidate running for office could no longer risk failing to address women's concerns. In addition, at the national level, Congress in 1972 voted to prohibit discrimination against women in the armed services. Under pressure from female voters, state legislatures reformed laws that had made it nearly impossible to prosecute cases involving sexual assaults against women. Women also worked with local governments and school boards to ensure that their daughters had the same opportunities to grow and thrive as their sons had.

Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1964–1980

Year	Eligible Adults Who Voted (in millions)	
	Women	Men
1964	39.2	37.5
1968	41.0	38.0
1972	44.9	40.9
1976	45.6	41.1
1980	49.3	43.8

Source: Center for the American Woman and Politics. See *Differences in Voter Turnout and* Sheet, July 1983.

In 1964, the gender gap between women and men at the ballot box was less than 2 percent. By 1980, that gap had stretched to over 5 percent. By voting in greater numbers than men did, women increased their political influence with elected officials.

Feminists made their voices heard at the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Here, Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem, cofounders of the National Women's Political Caucus along with Betty Friedan and Shirley Chisholm, address the press. That year, Representative Chisholm made a historic bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. In announcing her candidacy, Chisholm said, "I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman, and I am equally proud of that . . . I am the candidate of the people."



55.6 Technology Reshapes How People Work and Play

In 1977, the first installment of the *Star Wars* epic opened in movie theaters. With its dazzling computer-generated special effects and fast-paced action, the film was a blockbuster hit. *Star Wars* was so popular with moviegoers of all ages that it revived the science-fiction film genre. In addition, the movie showcased new uses of computer technology. By the 1970s, innovations in technology were changing everything from movies to medicine.

The Microprocessor Shrinks Computing Devices Computing machines began to change the ways Americans worked as early as the 1950s. However, the first computers were large and complicated to use. During the 1970s, new technologies that replaced bulky vacuum tubes and transistors with tiny silicon chips inspired a revolution in computing. For the first time, it became practical for ordinary Americans to buy and use a personal computer, or PC.

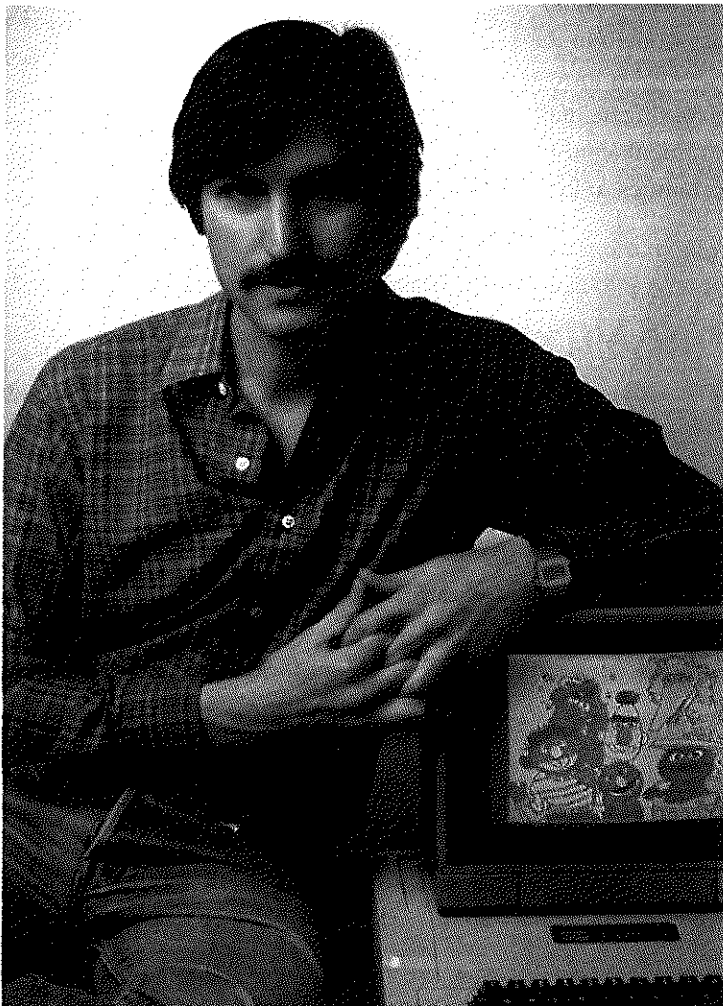
The introduction of microprocessors in 1971 made the PC possible. The processor is like the computer's brain—it performs all the basic operations that enable a computer to do work. A microprocessor integrates all the elements of a processor on a piece of silicon called a chip. As silicon chips shrank in size, so did computers and other computing devices.

The microprocessor inspired an array of new products that people today often take for granted. One was the pocket-sized calculator. The first of these, called the Bowmar Brain, hit the U.S. market in 1971. Unlike bulky adding machines, this mini number-cruncher was only a little more than 5 inches high and 3 inches wide. At a cost of \$245, it initially was a luxury item. However, as demand for pocket calculators grew and more companies began to make them, prices dropped significantly.

Another favorite new product based on microprocessor technology was the video game. The first successful video game was a ball-and-paddle game called Pong. It appeared in game arcades in 1972. In 1975, its manufacturer, Atari, released a home version in the form of a video game console that connected to a television. To the surprise of company executives, Atari sold 150,000 units that year. During the 1975 holiday season, people waited in lines for hours to purchase a “pong on chip”-powered video game to play at home.

In 1977, a California-based company called Apple Computer introduced a computer that was small enough and cheap enough to use at home. By today's standards, the Apple II was slow and had a minuscule amount of memory. But selling at a price that middle-class families could afford, the Apple II launched the personal computer revolution. Families, businesses, and schools purchased more than two million Apple IIs between 1977 and the end of the computer's production in 1993.

Steve Jobs cofounded Apple Computers in 1976. Two years later, his company released the Apple II—an affordable personal computer that revolutionized how people used computers at home and at work.



Medical Advances Advances in medical technology improved health care in the 1970s. Inspired by the success of the polio vaccine in preventing that disease, researchers developed vaccines for other childhood plagues. By 1971, scientists had introduced a combination vaccine to prevent measles, mumps, and rubella, or German measles.

The microprocessor soon found its way into a new imaging device that enabled doctors to look inside a person's body for problems. The computed tomography (CT) scanner was introduced in 1974. This device uses X-rays and a computer to construct detailed three-dimensional images of a patient's internal organs. Doctors use CT scanners to spot tumors, bone breaks, and other problems that less-advanced technologies leave invisible.

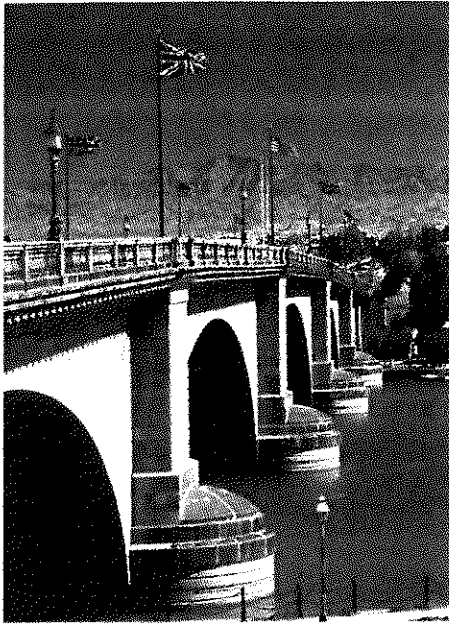
Other medical advances created new options for women who had difficulty getting pregnant. In 1978, the first "test-tube baby" was born in England. In such cases, a woman's egg is fertilized outside of her body. This type of fertilization is called *in vitro*, meaning "in glass," because it takes place in a glass test tube or dish. A doctor then implants the fertilized egg in the woman's womb, and pregnancy proceeds as normal. The first American test-tube baby was born in 1981. Although the technique remains controversial, more than 40,000 babies are born in the United States each year using *in vitro* fertilization.

Microwaves and Movies at Home Two electronic devices reshaped Americans' home lives in the 1970s. The first was the microwave oven. Microwave technology had existed since the 1940s, but it was not until the late 1960s that Raytheon produced a microwave oven for home use. Microwave ovens work by bombarding food with radio waves. As the waves pass through the food, they set molecules of water, fat, sugar, and other elements into rapid motion. This rapid motion causes friction, which creates heat. Foods that take an hour to cook in a conventional oven heat in minutes in a microwave—an attribute that appealed to the growing number of working women.

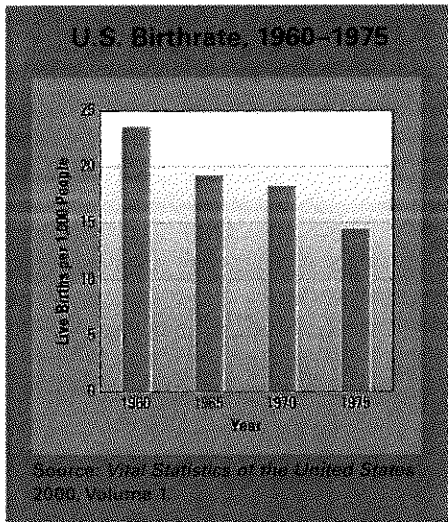
The second electronic device to change life at home was the videocassette recorder, or VCR. The VCR allowed people to record TV programs on videotape and replay the shows later. VCR users could also play prerecorded tapes of movies and videotapes they had made themselves using video cameras called camcorders. VCRs changed the way Americans entertained themselves. In the past, people had seen movies at theaters or watched them at home when broadcast on television. The VCR changed those viewing habits. Movie fans could rent or buy videotapes of movies to watch whenever they wanted. In addition, fans of television shows no longer had to plan their schedule around broadcast times.

A melted candy bar inspired Raytheon engineer Percy Spencer to investigate the heating properties of radio waves. The company's first microwave oven, introduced in 1947, stood 5 feet tall and weighed 670 pounds. Later advances in microelectronics led to the development of ovens small and light enough for home use.





When an American businessman bought London Bridge and relocated it to the Arizona desert in 1971, some people thought he was a bit crazy. Today, however, the bridge is the state's third most visited attraction. Retirees are drawn to Sunbelt states like Arizona to pursue an active lifestyle in a warm climate.



After a long baby boom, birthrates began to decline in the mid-1960s. This change represented a change to a longer-term trend—having smaller families.

55.7 The Baby Bust and Retirement Boom

In 1971, a new landmark appeared in the Arizona desert. It was London Bridge, the old English bridge that was always falling down in nursery rhymes. Built in 1831, London Bridge had become a victim of its own great weight. In 1962, London officials announced that it was sinking into the Thames River and would have to be torn down. An American businessman named Robert McCulloch had a different idea. McCulloch purchased the bridge and had it transported, stone by stone, to Arizona. Workers reassembled it in tiny Lake Havasu City, a new resort community that McCulloch was planning in the Arizona desert.

As McCulloch had hoped, the relocated London Bridge drew people to his real estate development. Many of the visitors were older people who chose to retire there. Lake Havasu City became one of numerous Sunbelt cities to benefit from the aging of the U.S. population that began in the 1970s.

A Baby Bust Begins the Aging of America During the baby boom that followed World War II, the average age of the U.S. population decreased year by year. In the 1970s, this trend reversed itself. Rather than getting younger, the U.S. population began growing older.

One cause of this shift was a drop in the birthrate. At the peak of the baby boom in 1957, the average American woman had three to four children. Between 1975 and 1980, that statistic slipped to between one and two children. Newspapers referred to this sharp decline in fertility as the “baby bust” or **birth dearth**.

Many factors contributed to this dearth, or lack, of births. One was the decision that a growing number of women made to enter the workforce. In 1950, one third of adult women worked outside the home. By 1978, fully half of adult women were part of the labor force. Those who chose to enter demanding professions, such as law, medicine, or teaching, often postponed having children to pursue their careers. Once they did begin families, most of those women gave birth to fewer children than their mothers had.

Another key factor in the aging of America was a rise in life expectancy. A person born in 1900 could expect to live an average of 49 years. In contrast, a person born in 1980 had a life expectancy of almost 74 years. This change meant that there were more older people than ever before.

With Longer Lives, Americans Redefine Retirement Longer life expectancies meant Americans who retired in the 1970s could look forward to more retirement years than earlier generations had. In addition, the economic boom that followed World War II had left many Americans with enough money to enjoy their last years. Many retirees owned their own homes. Most had pensions from years of working for one employer. Retirees also benefited from the expansion of Social Security and Medicare benefits in the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas in 1950, approximately 33 percent of older Americans lived in poverty, by 1978, only 14 percent were poor.

With these changes, older Americans began to redefine retirement as a time for fun, travel, and relocation. A growing number of older Americans, especially those living in northern states, sold their homes and moved to the Sunbelt. Other retirees, called “snowbirds,” traveled from place to place according to

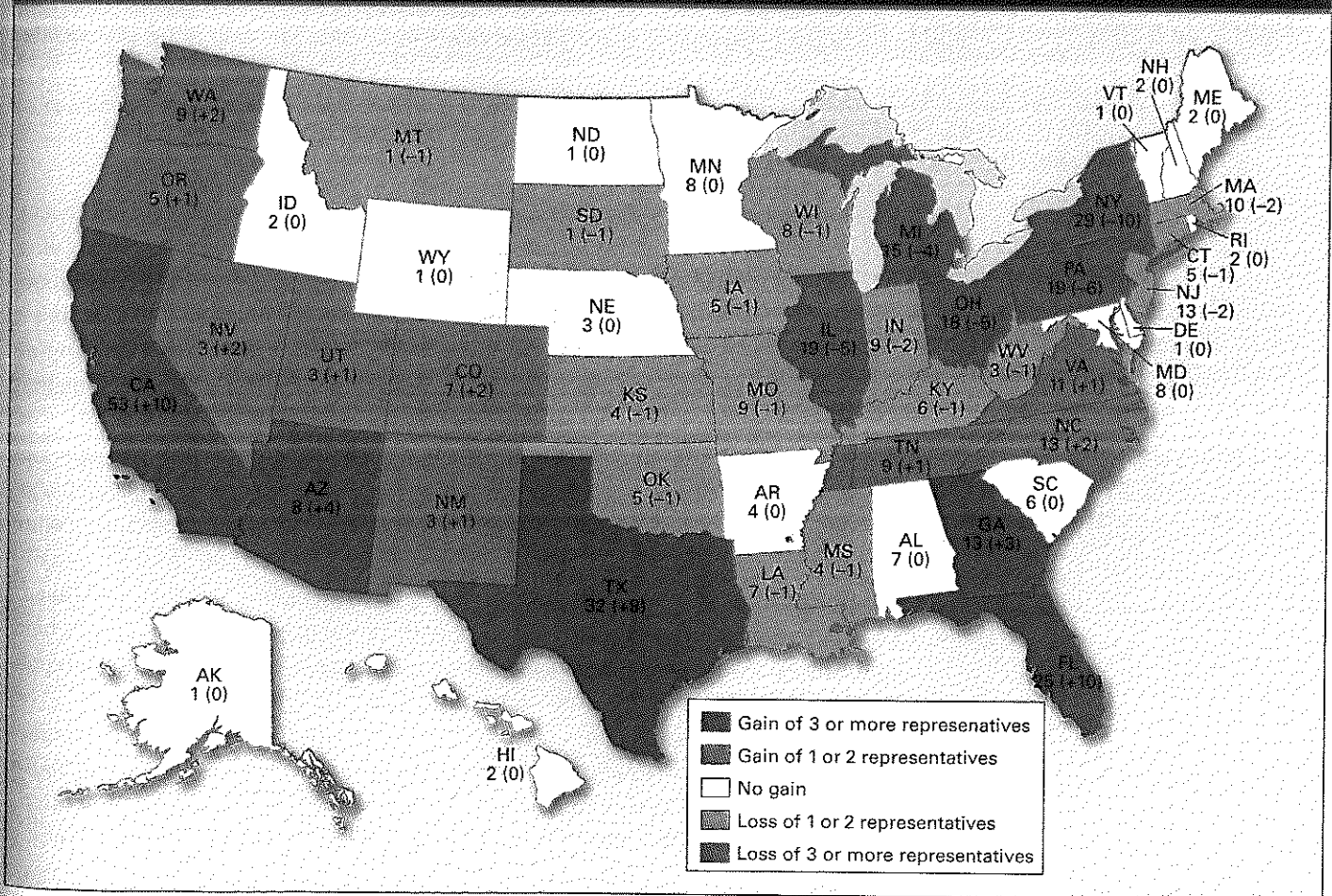
the season. Resort communities like Lake Havasu City attracted mobile retirees who visited there to boat and golf during the winter months.

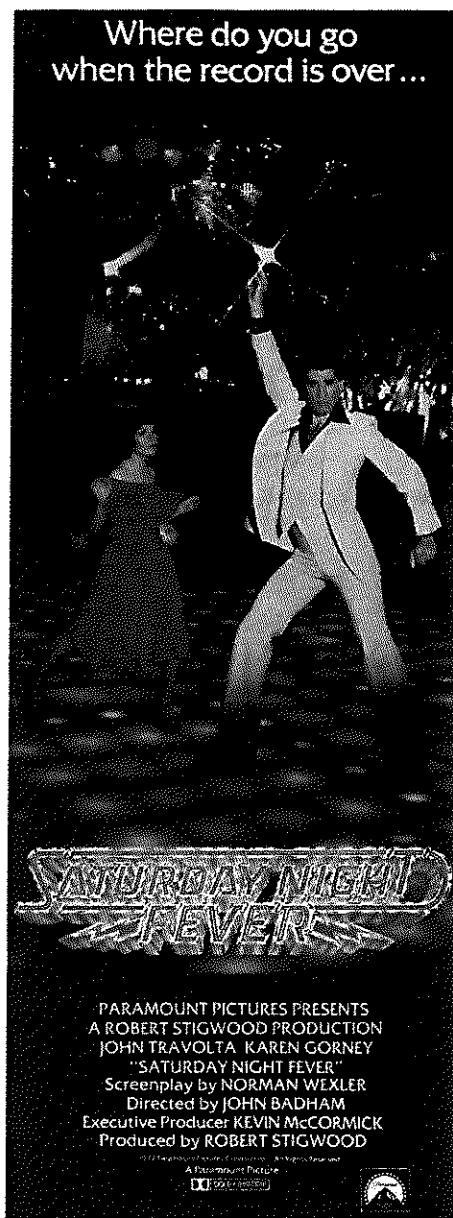
Population and Power Shift from the Rustbelt to the Sunbelt The movement of people from northern to southern states caused shifts in economic and political power. Fast-growing Sunbelt states saw their economies grow with the influx of people and new businesses. In contrast, the Northeast and the Midwest suffered economically. Parts of these regions were known together as the **Rustbelt** because of the rusting factories that declining industries left behind. Even well-established Rustbelt industries, such as steel milling and automobile assembly, struggled to survive the stagflation of the 1970s. Many laid-off workers then migrated to the Sunbelt in search of work.

The Sunbelt states saw their political clout grow along with their populations. After each census, seats in the House of Representatives are reapportioned to reflect population changes. States with expanded populations gain seats in the House and, with those seats, votes in the Electoral College. Since the 1970s, Sunbelt states have gained more than 35 electoral votes at the expense of Rustbelt states. Between 1964 and 2004, every successful candidate for president came from a Sunbelt state.

Warm weather and economic opportunity drew millions of Americans to the Sunbelt during and after World War II. As a result, this region has benefited from the reapportionment of seats in the House of Representatives that takes place shortly after each census.

Reapportionment of U.S. Representatives, 1973–2003





Released in 1977, the movie *Saturday Night Fever* explored ethnic identities while celebrating the hot trend of disco music and dancing.

55.8 Looking for Meaning and Fun in Daily Life

For some Americans, the 1970s were a time to look inward to explore who they were and what they believed. Others found joy in fads and fashions.

The Third Great Awakening: Self-Improvement and Spirituality When Tom Wolfe wrote of the Third Great Awakening in the 1970s, he had in mind two broad movements. He called the first the “therapeutic movement.” Its focus was on self-improvement through some kind of therapy, or treatment. A variety of self-improvement activities emerged during the decade. The common goal, observed Wolfe, was to change “one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very self.”

The second broad movement was more spiritual in nature. The 1970s saw an explosion of new religious groups. Some were based on Eastern religious traditions, mainly Buddhism and Hinduism. Buddhist meditation and the Hindu practice of Yoga both gained many followers. One new group, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, originated in India. Members of this group regularly chant a mantra, or set of sacred words, to bring about a higher spiritual awareness. Because the mantra begins with the phrase “Hare Krishna,” or “Oh, Lord Krishna,” the group is more commonly known as the Hare Krishnas.

Other new religious groups drew more from Western traditions. One of the most successful was the Unification Church, founded by a Korean religious leader named Sun Myung Moon. In 1972, Moon moved to the United States and began a major drive to expand his new faith. Called Moonies by people outside the church, his followers rapidly grew in number. In 1982, Moon made news by presiding over a mass marriage of 2,075 couples in New York’s Madison Square Garden. Moon had selected many of the couples to marry each other.

Exploring Identity, Ethnicity, and Diversity For some, turning inward meant exploring one’s cultural identity. This was especially true for descendants of immigrants from Italy, Poland, and other parts of southern and eastern Europe. When they arrived in the United States, these immigrants and their offspring were expected to “melt” into a society dominated by WASPs, or white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. As novelist James T. Farrell observed in 1972, “The melting pot was essentially an Anglo-Saxon effort to rub out the past of others.”

In his 1973 book *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, Michael Novak wrote about the stubborn survival of many ethnic groups. His goal, he explained, was to invite readers to explore their ethnic identity by asking questions like, “Who, after all, are you? What history brought you to where you are? Why are you different from others?” In answering such questions, many Americans reclaimed their ethnic background as a heritage to be proud of, not a past to leave behind. This new interest in **ethnicity**, or ethnic identity, quickly found its way into politics. In 1974, President Ford set up the Office of Ethnic Affairs.

The growing awareness of ethnic diversity also made its way into popular culture. Movies like *The Godfather* and *Saturday Night Fever* fascinated audiences with portrayals of ethnic groups whose values and traditions were often different from their own. The creators of the television show *Sesame Street*, which debuted in 1969, carefully constructed it to reflect the nation’s diversity.

The program took place on a fictional street on which people of different backgrounds lived and worked. The puppets on the show interacted with an African American couple, a Latina woman, and people with disabilities.

Fun, Fads, and Funky Fashions The 1970s also had a less serious side. Disco, a form of dance music loved by some and loathed by others, drew young people to dance clubs called discotheques. Disc jockeys at these clubs kept records spinning and dancers dancing long into the night. As one disco fan later wrote, "With its driving beats, [disco] almost had a hypnotic feel that makes you wanna dance . . . It's really hard to sit still when you hear a good disco tune."

The decade also saw its share of silly fads, such as the pet rock craze. A pet rock was a rock packed in a box that looked like a pet carrying case. Streaking, another fad, involved running naked through public places. In 1974, a streaker ran across the stage during the Academy Awards ceremony.

The 1970s also saw a flowering of funky fashions. Platform shoes, polyester leisure suits, and hot pants came and went. Bell-bottom pants moved from hippies to housewives. Also popular were mood rings, which supposedly changed color to match the wearer's mood. A black ring signaled stress. Blue meant the wearer was relaxed or in a romantic frame of mind.



Members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness dedicate their lives to the Supreme Lord Krishna. They use chanting of holy names to bring them closer to "Krishna consciousness."

Summary

During the 1970s, the U.S. economy suffered from stagflation as the nation faced a number of crises. The decade was also a time of changing views about everything from the environment and ethnicity to retirement and gender equality.

Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries A major cause of inflation was OPEC's decision to raise the price of oil. This led to rising prices for many goods.

National Energy Act In 1978, Congress tried to reduce U.S. dependence on imported oil. The National Energy Act offered incentives for conserving energy or using alternative energy sources.

Camp David Accords In 1978, Jimmy Carter brokered a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. The Camp David Accords ended the long state of war between these two countries.

Earth Day The first Earth Day celebration in 1970 signaled the emergence of a new environmental movement. Followers worked to clean up and protect the environment locally and globally. Congress passed antipollution laws such as the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Three Mile Island accident An accident at the Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station in 1978 highlighted the potential dangers of nuclear energy.

Searching for meaning During the 1970s, many Americans turned inward to search for meaning. Some explored self-help movements, others new religions, and others their ethnic identity.

Population changes Fewer births and longer life expectancies led to an aging of the U.S. population. The population also shifted south, as people migrated from the Rustbelt to the Sunbelt.

Gender equality Women worked to gain greater equality in the workplace and politics. In growing numbers, women entered professions that had once been dominated by males.