

AP United States History
Unit 9: The New Millennium
Topic- The New Millennium, 2000-2016

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Explain the causes and effects of the domestic and international challenges the United States has faced in the 21st century.

In the wake of attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, the United States launched military efforts against terrorism and lengthy, controversial conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Conflicts in the Middle East and concerns about climate change led to debates over U.S. dependence on fossil fuels and the impact of economic consumption on the environment.

Despite economic and foreign policy challenges, the United States continued as the world's leading superpower in the 21st century.

In the election of 2000, Vice-President Al Gore tried to distance himself from the popular, but controversial Bill Clinton, while the Governor of Texas, George W. Bush ran on the idea of restoring a sense of dignity to the office of the presidency. When the votes were counted, Gore was winning the popular vote, but he needed to win Florida to win the presidency in the Electoral College. The race in Florida was tight, but the third-party candidate, Ralph Nader of the Green Party had taken some votes away from Gore in areas that had traditionally voted for Democrats, while Bush began to develop a slim lead. Gore asked for a recount in Florida. The election continued for weeks, as the race continued to be a tight one. Finally, the Supreme Court stepped-in and awarded the close race to George W. Bush, Al Gore conceded, and the second person from Texas (LBJ being the first) to be elected to the presidency took the oath of office in 2001. Unlike LBJ, his roots were not from Texas. His grandfather had been a U.S. Senator from Connecticut. His father had been a hero in World War II, then moved to Houston, Texas and after a successful stint in the oil business, started a long career in politics as Texas moved from being the state of LBJ and the Democrats to being solid red, Republican. A successful oilman in his own right, after his father was defeated in his bid for re-election to the presidency in 1992, he decided to step into the ring as a politician and from 1994-2001, served as the Governor of Texas. As a governor, Bush had worked across both sides of the aisle in Texas and had been effective in getting legislation passed and tackling such issues as tort reform, tax cuts, welfare reform, juvenile reform, and education, which had been one of his priorities for running in the first place. Working alongside Democrats, he enacted tort reform, achieved modest tax cuts and reforms in juvenile justice, but he completely overhauled the Texas public education system, which now became based on school performance, the ability for students to read at the elementary level, and standardized testing. As President of the United States, Bush wanted to take his achievements in Texas and translate them onto the national stage. However, just nine months after taking the oath of office, his presidency would become overshadowed by a massive terrorist attack on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, initiated a foreign policy program that would last into four presidencies and detailed the longest military commitment in American history (next to, of course, the Indian Wars of the 19th century). On September 11, 2001, four airplanes were hijacked by al-Qaeda, a terrorist group linked to Islamic extremists who were under the direction of Osama Bin Laden. Most of the men who participated in the plot, including Osama Bin Laden, were originally from Saudi Arabia. During the Cold War, we had sent aid to groups such as Bin Laden's which were fighting against the Soviets in the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). However,

during the Persian Gulf War, the Saudi royal family requested that American troops be sent to protect Saudi Arabia from a possible Iraqi invasion. But, after removing the Iraqi threat to the tiny oil rich nation of Kuwait, the United States chose not to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, and to also maintain a military presence in Saudi Arabia (we still have a U.S. Air Force base in Saudi Arabia). It was the presence of the American military which angered Bin Laden, who regarded the Persian Gulf War as a fight between Muslims and felt that the West should not have been involved. As a Muslim extremist, he also believed that it was the ultimate affront to have Westerners in Saudi Arabia, his homeland and Islamic holy ground. Thus began his animus against the United States and the start of terrorist attacks leading up to the events of September 11, 2001. The first World Trade Center bombing occurred in New York City in 1992— afterward there were bombings at the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and of a naval warship, the U.S.S. Cole, but no large-scale attack on the American homeland. On September 11, 2001, two hijacked aircraft crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York City, instantly killings thousands of people, a third plane crashed into the Pentagon (the headquarters for the U.S. military), and a fourth hijacked plane crash-landed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after the passengers staged a revolt against the hijackers. In total, almost 3,000 Americans were killed in the attacks. The events of 9-11 quickly set into motion the War on Terror which became the defining foreign policy episode of the early 21st century. From 2001-2021, in the longest conflict ever fought by the U.S. military, American forces were on the ground in Afghanistan trying to root out Islamic extremist groups who harbored terrorist cells such as those led by Osama Bin Laden. Osama Bin Laden, was killed during the presidency of Barack Obama on May 2, 2011, by a team of U.S. Navy Seals in his compound near Abbotobod, Pakistan— just across the Afghan border. Fearing that Sadaam Hussein had also played a role in the terrorist attacks and was harboring weapons of mass destruction that could be used against the American people, U.S. military forces fought a long and protracted conflict in Iraq, which saw the death of Sadaam Hussien in 2006— and with the eruption of a civil war in Iraq, a brutal surge of American military forces was used to quell the unrest. From 2003-2011, U.S. military forces were engaged in the fighting on the ground in Iraq, but the war became quite controversial, as no weapons of mass destruction were ever found, and there were no links between Sadaam Hussien, and any of the terrorist groups that had been a part of the 9-11 attacks. Much like the war in Vietnam, the Iraq War divided the American public and even for those who supported it— it led to scorn and ugliness for example, toward the nation of France, who did not see any of the links that the U.S. and Great Britain had in going to war in Iraq (And just as in World War I, when all things German were scorned, so were all things that were French— for example, instead of French fries, they were called Freedom Fries.) And after being told there would be a quick victory in the conflict, it lasted throughout the presidency of George W. Bush, until it was finally brought to an end during the presidency of Barack Obama, after public opinion had long soured on it. The War on Terror made tremendous changes at home which led to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, which was created to marshall all of the resources necessary to protect America from another 9-11 style attack. It led to the creation of the TSA, or the Transportation Security Administration, which thoroughly beefed-up security and scrutiny at America's airports and ports of entry. Also, it led to the creation of the Patriot Act of 2001, which allowed government agencies to have the power to collect communications records on individuals who were suspected of having terrorist leanings. The act expired in 2020. In the early years of the War on Terror, Americans had been united much like they had been during World War II, but after the growing controversy of the Iraq War, what seemed to be a never ending commitment on the ground in Afghanistan, and a tremendous recession which struck in 2008, the country became as divided as it had been during the war in Vietnam— and it still is to this day.

The handling of domestic policy issues by the Bush administration also angered and divided Americans— especially during his second term in office. His effort to privatize Social Security angered senior citizens who had put their entire lifetime of earnings into the program. The Bush administration did get a prescription drug coverage bill passed into law which mollified seniors, in particular. In education, the Bush administration passed what became known as NCLB, or No Child Left Behind. Much like his initiatives in Texas public education, the federal goals tied performance and funding in the school systems to reading levels, and school district and student performance on standardized tests. Across the nation, the act was controversial because other states already had their own accountability measures in place— many of whom were performing better than the Texas

model, or system and because the model relied so heavily on standardized testing. However, the Bush administration also levied a series of tax cuts— across the board. As a consequence, the balanced budgets of the late 1990s went away. The national debt soared. The efforts of the Bush administration to cut other federal programs were stymied by the constant attention which had to be given to the War on Terror. In 2005, an environmental disaster of epic proportions destroyed large portions of the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. A category five storm, Hurricane Katrina, caused more than \$100 billion dollars in damage and took 1,800 lives. It also led to a mass exodus from New Orleans, for those who could afford to leave the city to places such as the Greater Houston area. Despite federal efforts from such agencies as FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency), the Bush administration was criticized for its slow response to the disaster, as thousands of residents of the city were huddled inside the Superdome (an NFL stadium) until the situation could be stabilized on the ground and the flooding subsided. But, the greatest crisis which would divide the nation came at the end of the second term in the Bush administration— the Great Recession of 2008. During the twilight of the Clinton administration, the banking and trading (in stocks) industries had been deregulated for the first time since the Great Depression. In the early 2000s, the Bush administration began to push the idea of home ownership into the American public sphere— to that end, deregulating loan agencies even further to sell products that featured revolving interest rates and payments. Throughout the early 2000s, Americans continued their movement into the suburbs, but even more rapidly than ever before and many of them purchased homes at rates which became less affordable over time. By 2007, a credit crisis was looming in the housing market and it threatened to shut down some of America's largest financial institutions. Due to the War on Terror, gas prices rose rapidly, and a recession set into the American economy, with millions of Americans losing their jobs. But, 2008 was an election year and with the Bush administration set to inject billions of dollars into saving the financial industry, it would be up to the next president and their administration to see the process of economic recovery through to fruition. The election of 2008 was one of the most unique in American history. In the Democratic primary, Barack Obama, an African-American senator from Illinois defeated Hillary Clinton, the senator from New York and the first female candidate to come relatively close to winning the nomination of her party. In the Republican primary, Vietnam War veteran and hero, John McCain, a senator from Arizona won the nomination. In the general election, McCain's support for the war in Iraq hurt his candidacy, while Obama was chastised for the past criticisms of the country that had been leveled by his supporters and some of his earlier comments about rural white Americans who had been living in poverty (clinging to their guns and religion— in his words). In the end, in 2008, Obama won handily and his election signaled that the divisions in the country were about to become much more pronounced than ever before.

The problems the Obama administration inherited were immense in scope— two foreign conflicts that were a part of the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, an economic meltdown of epic proportions, and an American society that was slowly unraveling due to partisan politics (over issues such as gun control, abortion, immigration, and LGBTQ rights). During the Obama years, America withdrew from Iraq in 2011. But, the vacuum of American forces leaving the country led to another civil war which pitted the American-backed government against a terrorist group known as ISIS. It would take several years to rid the country of the threat posed by this terrorist organization. The conflict in Afghanistan continued until 2021, when American troops were withdrawn— five years after Obama left the presidency. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, a group of Islamic fundamentalists who had harbored terrorist groups such as Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda, assumed power once American forces were withdrawn from the country. In domestic affairs, his administration continued with the Bush policies of injecting money into failing financial institutions and large-scale businesses to keep the recession from worsening. This effort came as a component of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and through the use of TARP (the Troubled Asset Relief Program). Though it was painfully slow in taking effect, by 2015 the economy had recovered back to pre-2007 levels. But, many Americans saw the bailouts as a wasteful use of tax dollars and that during a time of economic upheaval that the Obama administration was more interested in saving businesses and institutions rather than people. In 2010, the Obama administration signed the Affordable Care Act into law, which much like Medicare, offered a low-cost government-backed insurance program for those who could normally not afford health insurance. Though it is highly popular now, at the time, it divided Americans— as some did not like the idea of government sponsored

healthcare, while others feared losing access to the healthcare that they already had at the time. The divisions over healthcare led Obama to be severely criticized and tested in the 2012 election, and his party (the Democrats) had already lost the Congress during the 2010 midterm elections. With a divided government— a Democratic President and a Republican Congress, very few pressing issues, such as immigration reform, education, and criminal justice reform were addressed— in fact, none of them have been addressed to this date. On December 14, 2012, just after winning reelection, a class of first graders, their teacher, and their principal were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Gun control became a major issue, but despite the tragedy, conservatives in Congress refused to pass additional gun control restrictions and the issue has continued to divide Americans to this very day. Despite the economic recovery by 2015, the winding down of the conflicts in the War on Terror (the Obama administration began withdrawals in Afghanistan in 2011), and great gains having been made in civil rights (In the LBGTQ community, marriage equality was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2015.), there were feelings of anger and resentment that were still simmering across the country as America's political divisions continued to become much more pronounced. And, after 2016, we are still very much divided by politics to this very day in America.