The 1970s — A Crisis in Confidence

Perspective: Why break in to the DNC headquarters? After all, it’s not like McGovern was terribly popular. But the CREEP didn’t care, and a massive cover-up ensued after the break-in went bad. Nixon’s massive victory in ’72 wasn’t enough to save him from his own missteps, and the 1970s was a decade filled with questions of confidence not only about the government, but about “American values” in general. Yet as I recall, the Bicentennial was fun…

I. NIXON IN POWER

The “New Nixon” appeared in 1969
A man of restraint, détente
A man with a strong staff who isolated him from Congress and his own cabinet
The “Old Nixon” was just beneath the surface
Shy, distrustful
Sought to run the show without input from anyone else (Congress, Supreme Court, etc)
Relied on NSA Kissinger for foreign policy help; ignored other advisers

Reshaping the Great Society
Promised to bring Americans together in his inaugural speech
Hoped to shift responsibility for social programs from federal to state government
Sought to make government more efficient
Capped welfare payments at $2.5 billion per year
States made supplements
Had Attorney General John Mitchell ask for a delay in Mississippi school desegregation
Supreme Court denied this request
MS blamed the Court, not Nixon, for desegregation
Nixon appointed Warren Burger to replace Earl Warren
Nixon’s southern appointees were blocked by the Senate
Nixon then appointed Harry Blackmun, Lewis Powell and William Rehnquist
Nixon’s Court was moderate and did not overturn Warren Court decisions

Nixonomics
Vietnam had caused deficit spending
Nixon’s solution was to reduce government spending and raise interest rates
Soon there was 6% inflation, business failures and a recession
Democrats labeled this plan “Nixonomics”
Problems worsened until Nixon froze wages and prices in August ’71
Balance of trade declined with devaluation of the dollar and 10% import tax
Recession ended by 1st quarter of 1972

Building a Republican Majority
Republicans lost ground in Congressional elections in 1970
VP Agnew emphasized moral and societal problems, blaming liberals for these
They regained some seats, but were unable to retake a majority (recession)

In Search of Détente
Henry Kissinger (refugee from Nazi Germany) designed Nixon’s foreign policy
Saw the US/USSR power struggle as something to be managed, not won
Both sought to withdraw from an arms race, ply the USSR with grain and technology,
and open relations with China to increase USSR/China tensions
Nixon toured China in February of 1972
Brezhnev agrees to SALT I in May 1972
Limited each nation to 200 ABMs
Froze production of offensive ballistic missiles for 5 years

**Ending the Vietnam War**
3 part plan to end the Vietnam Conflict
1. Gradual withdrawal of troops + “Vietnamization”
2. Renewed bombing in Hanoi
   The most controversial part of the plan
   Air and ground strikes led to US student protests
   Kent State (four killed, eleven wounded)
   Jackson State (two killed)
   Most Americans blamed rioting student for the deaths
   Nixon sided with the “silent majority” rather than the “bums”
   400+ college campuses reported riots
3. “Hard-line” negotiations with North Vietnam
   Begun in 1969, completed in 1972
   Hanoi signs truce after a series of bombing raids
   POWs returned in exchange for US withdrawal
   North Vietnam allowed to keep troops in the South
   A negotiated surrender...

**II. THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY - What were these folks thinking?**
**The Election of 1972**
George McGovern of South Dakota won the nomination of the Democratic Party
   George Wallace got shot and was paralyzed
   Edmund Muskie lost his temper and front-runner status
   McGovern hoped to unite the New Left
Nixon let others campaign for him
   Painted McGovern as an extremist
   Emphasized his prowess at foreign affairs
Nixon wins in a landslide
   Party realignment seems to occur
   GOP makes gains in the Sunbelt
   Democratic blocks include minorities and low income voters

**The Watergate Scandal** (also see Watergate Chronology)
The cover-up was unsuccessful
Nixon disputed turning over the Oval Office tapes
   Claimed executive privilege
   Fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, but Leon Jaworski still wanted the tapes
The Supreme Court ruled that Nixon had to turn over the tapes
Nixon resigns on August 9, 1974
Showed the independence of the branches of government, the value of checks and balances
Also showed several the inside of a jail cell...

III. ENERGY AND THE ECONOMY

The October War
Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on October 6, 1973
A result was the formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)
US gave aid to Israel, OPEC cut production until Israel agreed to give up lands taken in the Six Day War of 1967
A world-wide oil shortage resulted
Gas prices rose, gas shortages occurred
An energy crisis became apparent; US production and consumption was disproportionate

The Oil Shocks
Cheap energy had been a mainstay of American life (industrial growth, cars, suburbs, etc)
In the 70s, OPEC raised the price of oil from $3 per barrel to $11.65 (Now? $100 higher)
GNP dropped 6%, unemployment rose to 9% in 1974
Ford’s major cuts could not offset budget deficits
Inflation and the economy worsened under Carter
Crude oil rose to $30 per barrel by 1979
A short-term energy crisis and gas shortage resulted

The Search for an Energy Policy
US economic reliance on fossil fuels was problematic
EPA passed rules to urge industry to switch to clean burning fuels
Clean Air Act (1970)
Strip mining and off shore drilling were still legal despite protests
Republicans favored expanded supplies, fuel price controls and greater use of nuclear energy
Democrats favored price controls, conservation and rationing
Congress funded the Alaskan pipeline and mandated fuel efficient cars
No real plan developed; energy usage and imports continued to increase

The Great Inflation
Vietnam/Great Society caused huge budget deficits
Wages fell while prices increased dramatically—many prices doubled
Carter/Federal Reserve Chairman Volcker tightened the money supply
Interest rates achieved record levels
Prime rate reached 20% (house and car loans were skyrocketing!!!)

The Shifting American Economy
Heavy industry (steel, autos, manufacturing) declined
IBM, Transamerica and high-tech industries did well
Industry shifted to the Sunbelt—educated but non-union labor
IV. PRIVATE LIVES—PUBLIC ISSUES

The Changing American Family
Declines in two parent families and stay at home mom households
Fewer families—by 1990, 30% of households were 1 person
Divorce rates leveled off after doubling through the 60s and 70s
Average age of marriage rises to above 25 (19 in the 50s)
% of children living with only one parent doubled over 20 years

Gains and Setbacks for Women
61% of new jobs in the era were filled by women
most were “pink collar”
many complained of a glass ceiling
Women on the Supreme Court, at West Point and Annapolis
Women’s earnings were 73% of men’s in 1999
Increasing #s of women owned businesses
ERA was approved by Congress
“Equality of rights under the law shall not be abridged by the United States or any
state on account of sex.”
Backed by NOW, opposed by Phyllis Schlafly
Roe v Wade decided in 1973
Protected a right to abortion in the first trimester with limited rights after
Limited by the Hyde Amendment (1978)—no federal funds for abortions
“Roe no more”...still a great controversy

The Gay Liberation Movement
Folks began coming out of the closet, especially in major cities
A gay rights plank added to the 1980 Democrat Platform
AIDS led to greater activism in the 1980s
Clinton enacted “Don’t ask, don’t tell”—not exactly a bold move
Gay marriage became an “issue” in the late 90s
1998 Matthew Shepard murder gained national attention
Gays became a disproportionately powerful minority group by 2000
Americans generally oppose discrimination against gays

V. POLITICS AFTER WATERGATE

The Ford Administration
Ford was pleasant, unpretentious and likeable, but...
He pardoned Nixon on September 8, 1974
His attempt to end Watergate backlash failed badly
Ford appointed Bush to the CIA to fix its rogue tendencies
Ford was far more conservative than Nixon on social programs
Vetoed 39 bills

The 1976 Campaign
Carter was a nice, honest fellow
Nearly squandered a 30 point lead in the polls
Won a narrow victory in 1976
Disenchantment with Carter

Ok, so he was a nice, honest family man...but a good president?
No discernable political philosophy
A millionaire populist
Advised by a combination of outsiders and establishment
Deficits continued, reform attempts failed
Carter blamed the voters—an interesting strategy
His “national malaise” speech noted a “crisis of confidence”
Noted a weakened national will to face our country’s problems

Gee—I wonder if these weak-willed, soul-less voters will re-elect Carter??

VI. FROM DÉTENTE TO RENEWED COLD WAR

Retreat in Asia
An ugly retreat from Saigon ended official US involvement in Vietnam
Ford ordered an attack on the Khmer Rouge (Cambodia) after the Mayaguez was seized

Accommodation in Latin America
Carter returns the canal to Panama (1977 treaty-2000 return of control)
Carter’s plan to base foreign aid on human rights reports fails short
Concerns in Nicaragua and El Salvador lead to direct US military aid

The Quest for Peace in the Middle East
Score one for Carter—the Camp David Peace Accords!
Begin (Israel) and Sadat (Egypt) agree to return the Sinai to Egypt
Leaving out the PLO and USSR perhaps alienated other Arab nations
Some trouble in Iran—the Ayatollah ousts the Shah (1979)
The Shah is exiled and comes to the US for medical treatment
Militants seize the US embassy and 58 hostages
An aborted rescue attempt by US forces causes 8 deaths

The Cold War Resumes
Carter’s emphasis on human rights seems like abandonment of détente
His advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (now advising Obama) hoped to “stock it to the Russians”
Speeded up the arms race with MX missiles and Trident subs
Used new relations with China to challenge the USSR
USSR invaded Afghanistan to ensure a friendly regime
Carter responded by boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics
Not a popular move in an election year
Between this and the rescue attempt, plus the economy → Carter might as well have been Herbert Hoover