

The Culture Wars Continue

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

During the 1992 presidential election, Bill Clinton ran as a “New Democrat” who was conservative when it came to the economy but liberal on social issues. These issues included racial equality, gay rights, and women’s rights in the workplace. However, the culture wars of the 1980s persisted into the 1990s—throughout Clinton’s presidency. Divisions over race, gender, sexual identity, and family values widened during the decade and took on partisan overtones.

This tutorial examines the culture wars of the 1990s in four parts:

1. Mass Incarceration

One of the biggest socioeconomic transformations that impacted the United States during the late 20th and early 21st centuries was the rise of the “prison industrial complex,” or **mass incarceration**. This phenomenon transcended presidential administrations and was rooted in the 1970s.



TERM TO KNOW

Mass Incarceration

The significant increase in the U.S. prison population during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. For most of the 20th century, prison populations in the United States declined. However, urban crime rates began to increase during the 1970s. There were a number of reasons for the increase, some of which are best expressed in terms of demographics. Most offenders were male and between the ages of 16 and 36—**baby boomers** who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s.



TERM TO KNOW

Baby Boomers

Large generation of Americans born between 1946 and 1964.

Another factor that contributed to the rise in violent crime was drug use, including the abuse of crack cocaine. A cheap form of cocaine that addicts smoked, crack swept through America’s inner cities during the early 1980s. Drug dealing on city streets led to violence between rival gangs. Drug use resulted in addiction, contributing to urban decay in Black and minority neighborhoods. Violence and addiction frightened many middle-class suburban residents.

Instead of addressing these problems with treatment and rehabilitation programs, some officials declared a

“war on drugs.” They increased funding of law enforcement to get “tough on crime.”



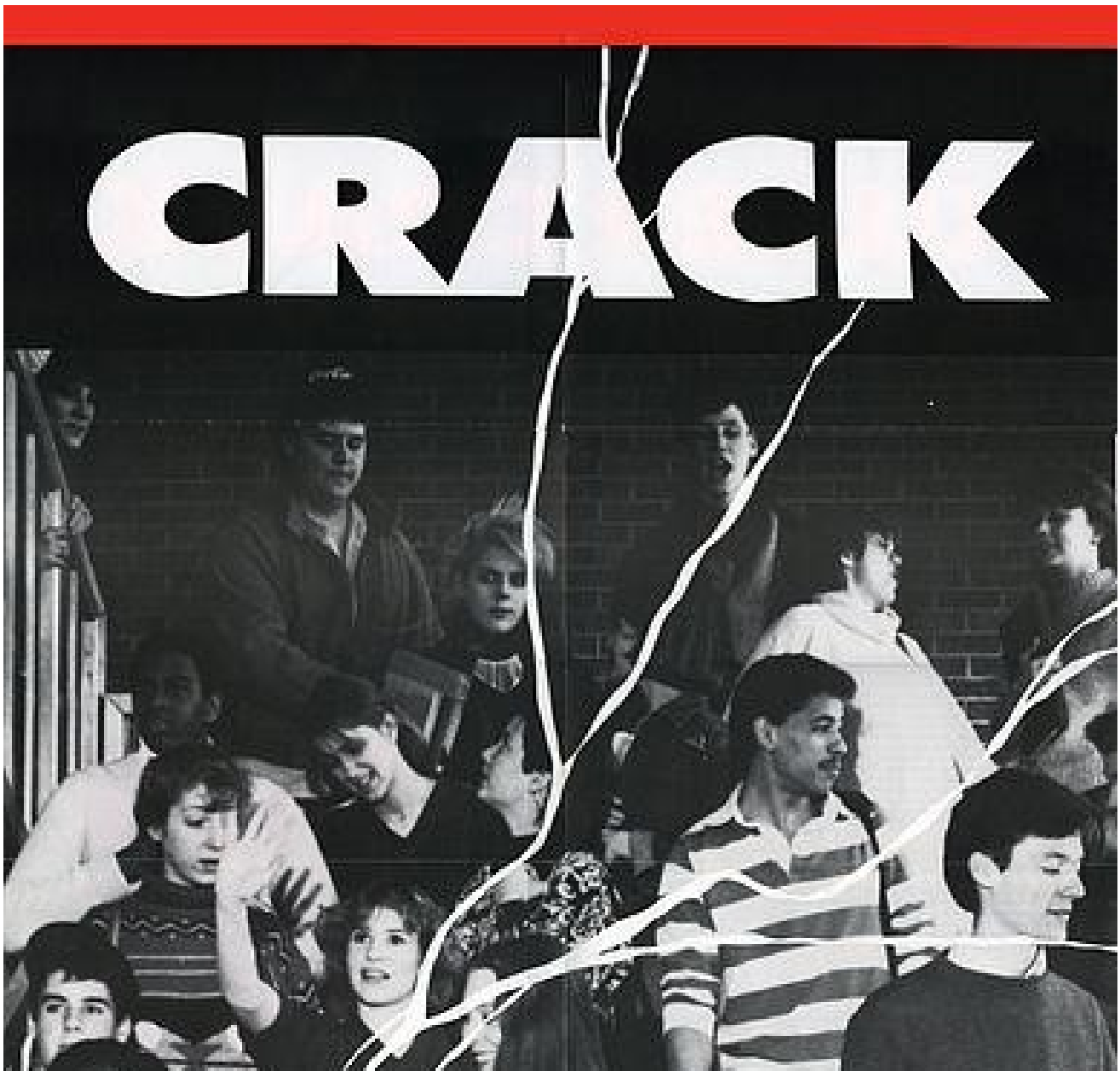
DID YOU KNOW

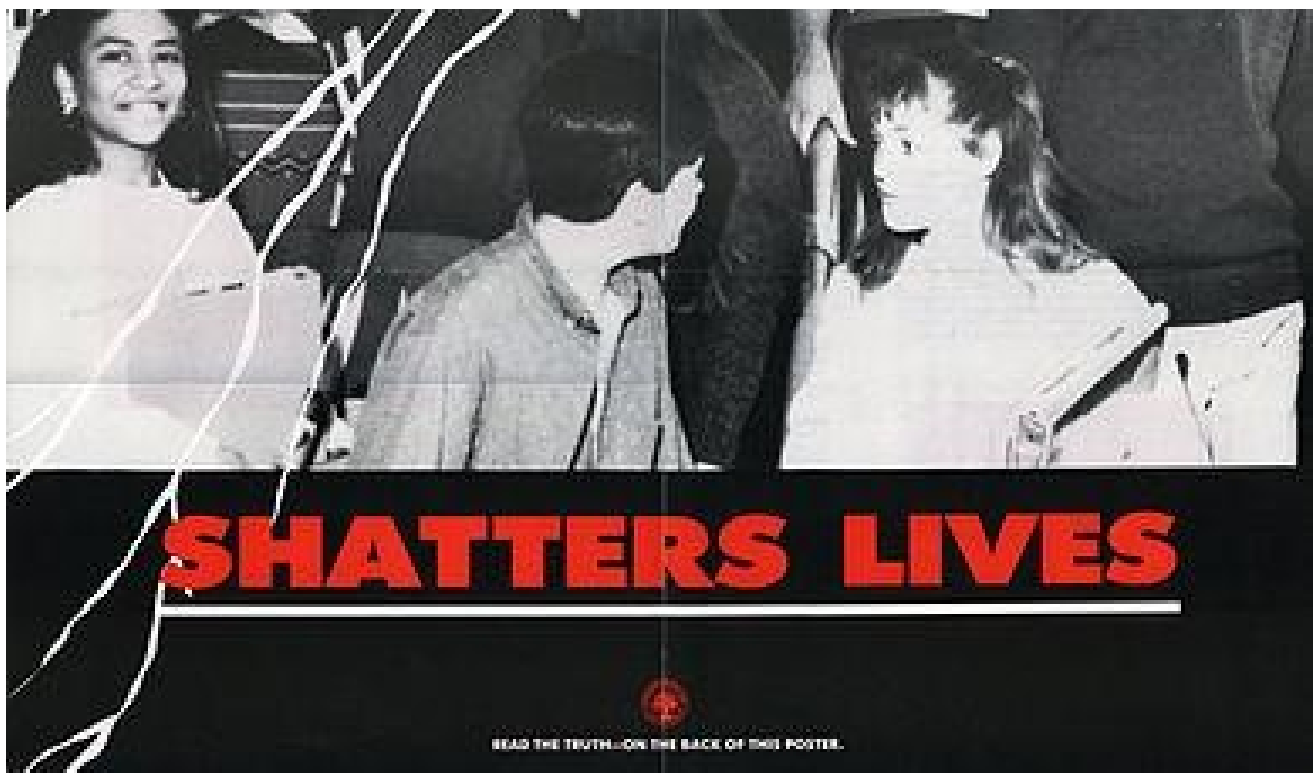
President Richard Nixon first used the phrase “war on drugs” in 1971.

Throughout the 1980s, local, state, and federal politicians enacted harsh, mandatory sentences for drug offenses as part of an emphasis on “law and order.” Mandatory minimum sentences included long periods of incarceration, provided few opportunities for parole, and applied to many drug crimes, including nonviolent offenses. In 1994, California introduced a “three strikes” law that mandated a state prison term of at least 25 years to life without parole for any third felony conviction—even nonviolent ones.

The federal government reinforced this trend by providing federal sentencing guidelines and funding local law enforcement agencies. In 1994, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. In addition to providing increased resources to law enforcement officials, the act funded prison construction and expanded the federal death penalty.

While police forces and governments cracked down on drug-related offenses, some government officials asserted that drug use, addiction, and related crime were reflections of individual morality rather than social problems related to race or class.





Posters like this one from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education warned teenagers of the dangers of crack cocaine.

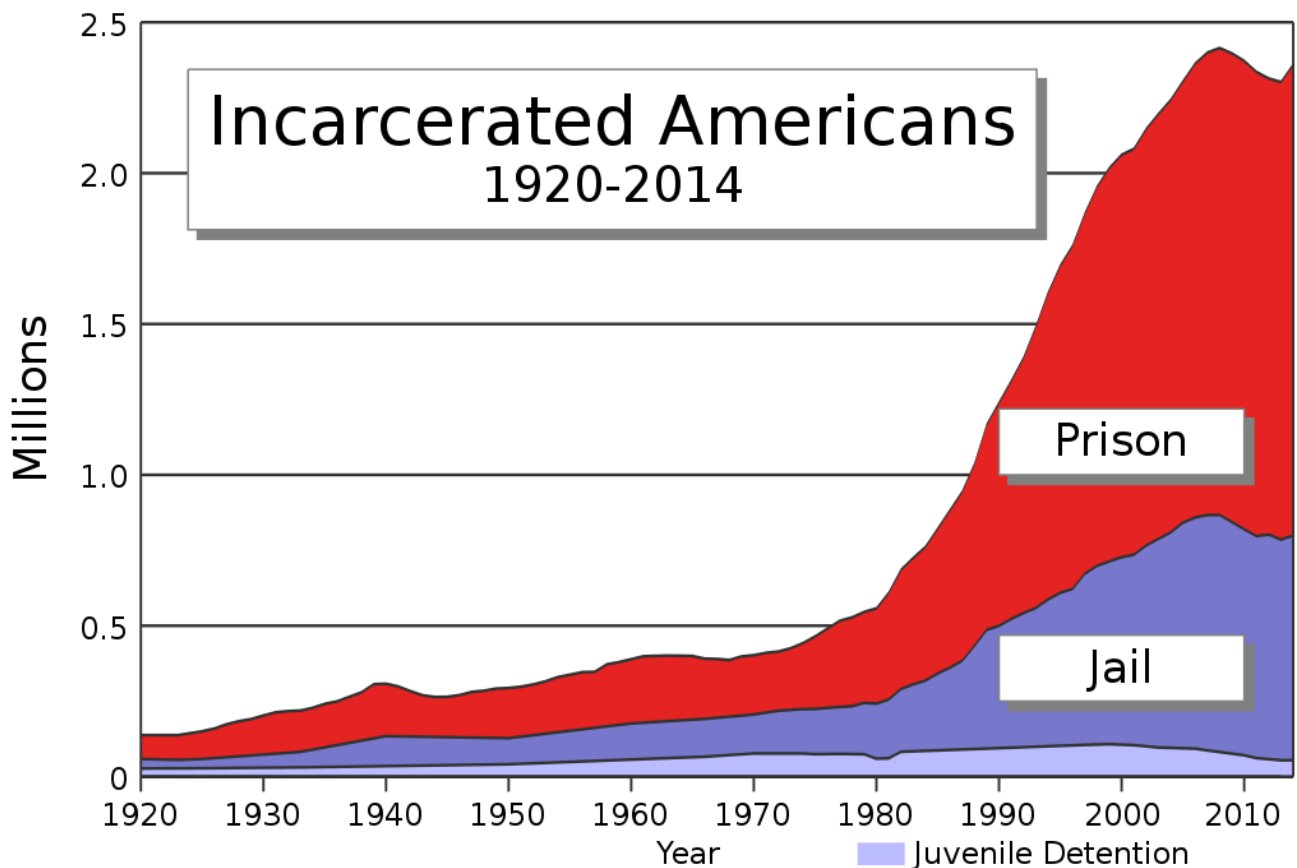
➞ EXAMPLE During the 1980s, First Lady Nancy Reagan launched the “Just Say No” initiative to discourage children from using drugs.





Nancy Reagan speaks at a “Just Say No” rally in 1987.

Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, mandatory minimum sentences swelled prison populations. In 2000, the U.S. prison population was 2.1 million.



This graph, which shows the number of people in U.S. jails, prisons, and juvenile detention centers by decade, illustrates the increase in incarceration during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. (Prisons are long-term state or federal facilities; jails are local, short-term facilities.)

As prisons became more crowded, federal and state governments funded the construction of additional facilities. They also increasingly outsourced prison management to private companies. Between 1990 and 1995, 200 new prisons were built in the United States.



DID YOU KNOW

Suburban and rural communities that struggled with deindustrialization and depopulation often welcomed the construction of prisons as a source of jobs and revenue.

2. Racial Unrest

Mass incarceration revealed the persistence of racial and economic inequality in the justice system and throughout society.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the “war on drugs” led some police and judicial departments to inflict severe penalties on Black men who lived in inner-city neighborhoods. Law enforcement’s focus on urban Black and minority neighborhoods persisted into the 1990s and early 2000s as drugs such as heroin appeared in American cities.

African Americans were seven times more likely to be imprisoned than White Americans, and, by the early 21st century, approximately 70% of the prison population was Black.



DID YOU KNOW

During the 1980s, African American men in urban neighborhoods received severe sentences when convicted of using or selling crack cocaine. White Americans in suburban neighborhoods received lighter sentences when convicted of using or selling powder cocaine.

The “war on drugs” and the resulting mass incarceration had a lasting, destabilizing legacy in poor Black neighborhoods. Imprisonment deprived these neighborhoods of residents who might have contributed to community development. The high rate of incarceration of Black men meant that many children grew up without the presence of a father.

Frustration with urban poverty and racism in the justice system resulted in violence in Los Angeles in 1992, when an all-White jury found that four city police officers were not guilty of beating a Black motorist, **Rodney King**. News of the verdict led to the **Los Angeles Riots of 1992**, which lasted 4 days and left 55 people dead. The riots took place throughout the city, mostly in Black and Latino neighborhoods.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Rodney King

African American motorist in Los Angeles whose brutal beating at the hands of White police officers led to riots throughout the city that lasted 4 days and left 55 people dead.



TERM TO KNOW

Los Angeles Riots of 1992

The largest urban race riots in the United States since the 1960s; they reflected African American anger regarding economic inequality and police brutality.

The Los Angeles Riots revealed that some government officials did not connect racial inequality to a lack of economic opportunity. The riots also indicated that the “war on drugs” and the emphasis on “law and order” were creating divisions between police officers and the citizens they were responsible for protecting.

3. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

Although he campaigned as a “**New Democrat**,” President **Bill Clinton** was considered socially liberal by many Democrats (and many social activists). Following his election, it became clear that the sexual revolution continued to be a divisive issue along partisan lines.



TERM TO KNOW

New Democrat

A member of the Democratic Party who combined the party’s liberal social policies with economic conservatism.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William J. Clinton

Democratic president from 1993 to 2001, who, as a “New Democrat,” advocated a compassionate conservatism that combined socially liberal policies with fiscal conservatism.

Just days after his victory in the 1992 election, Clinton promised to end the 50-year ban on gays and lesbians serving in the military. However, after his inauguration in January 1993, Clinton amended his promise to appease social conservatives. Instead of lifting the ban, he required the Armed Forces to adopt a “**don’t ask, don’t tell**” policy. Active-duty servicemen (and servicewomen) would not be required to disclose their sexual orientation. However, they faced dismissal if they indicated that they were gay.



TERM TO KNOW

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

The policy implemented by the Clinton administration that permitted homosexual and bisexual individuals to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces as long as they did not disclose their sexual orientation. Despite Clinton’s efforts, “don’t ask, don’t tell” did not satisfy Republican conservatives who sought to exclude gays and lesbians from the military entirely. It also did not satisfy gay rights activists who argued that homosexual individuals, like heterosexual individuals, should be able to live without fear of retribution, no matter their sexuality.

Following Republican gains during the 1994 midterm elections and the subsequent **Contract With America**, President Clinton continued to work with political conservatives on matters concerning sexual orientation.



TERM TO KNOW

Contract With America

A list of eight legislative reforms or initiatives that Republicans promised to enact if they gained a majority in Congress in the 1994 midterm elections.

One of the most notable collaborations occurred in September of 1996 when Clinton signed the **Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)** into law.



TERM TO KNOW

Defense of Marriage Act

Defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman; denied federal benefits to same-sex couples.

Both Houses of Congress passed DOMA by wide margins, so a presidential veto would have been easily overridden. However, Clinton was personally opposed to same-sex marriage. In addition to defining marriage as a heterosexual union and denying federal benefits to same-sex couples, the law allowed individual states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages that had been legally performed in other states.

In some other areas related to sexual orientation, however, Clinton and many other Americans showed greater acceptance of gay rights; the movement was vibrant in many cities. The administration appointed openly gay men and women to government positions. President Clinton denounced discrimination against people with AIDS. By the end of the 20th century, advances in treatment caused the AIDS epidemic in the United States to subside.

4. Impeachment

Partisan divisions regarding sexual discrimination, harassment, and misconduct widened during the 1990s.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1991, President **George H. W. Bush** appointed **Clarence Thomas**, an African American, to the Supreme Court. During Thomas’s confirmation hearings, Anita Hill, a lawyer who had

once worked for him, alleged that he had sexually harassed her while he was her supervisor. Thomas denied the accusations and, to the outrage of feminists, was appointed to the Supreme Court by a Senate vote of 52 to 48. Hill, also African American, later noted, “I had a gender, he had a race.”



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George H. W. Bush

Vice president under Ronald Reagan and Republican president from 1989 to 1993, who navigated the collapse of the Soviet Union and the “new world order” that followed the end of the Cold War, including Operation Desert Storm, which turned back Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait.

Clarence Thomas

First African American member of the Supreme Court who, during the nomination process, faced allegations of sexual harassment from Anita Hill, a lawyer who had once worked for Thomas.

In the aftermath of Thomas’s confirmation, sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace gained wider attention. Sexual harassment complaints made to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission increased 50% by the fall of 1992.

In 1993, President Clinton signed the Family and Medical Leave Act, which required employers with more than 50 employees to give up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to fathers or mothers with new babies. President Bush vetoed this measure twice during his administration.

Republicans directed a variety of accusations at Bill Clinton during his presidency. Among them was an allegation of improper involvement in a failed real estate venture associated with the Whitewater Development Corporation while he was governor of Arkansas. In August 1994, Congress appointed Kenneth Starr, a former federal appeals court judge, to investigate the matter. At this time, Clinton was also facing a lawsuit filed by Paula Jones, a former Arkansas state employee, who accused him of sexually harassing her during his time as governor. Starr investigated this case as well.

When a federal court dismissed Jones’s suit in 1998, her lawyers appealed the decision and submitted a list of other alleged sexual harassment victims. That list included **Monica Lewinsky**, a White House intern. Lewinsky and Clinton denied under oath that they once had a sexual relationship. The evidence, however, indicated otherwise. As a result, Starr investigated the possibility that Clinton had committed perjury. Clinton continued to deny the existence of a sexual relationship with Lewinsky. He appeared on national television to assure the American people that he had not had sexual relations with her.

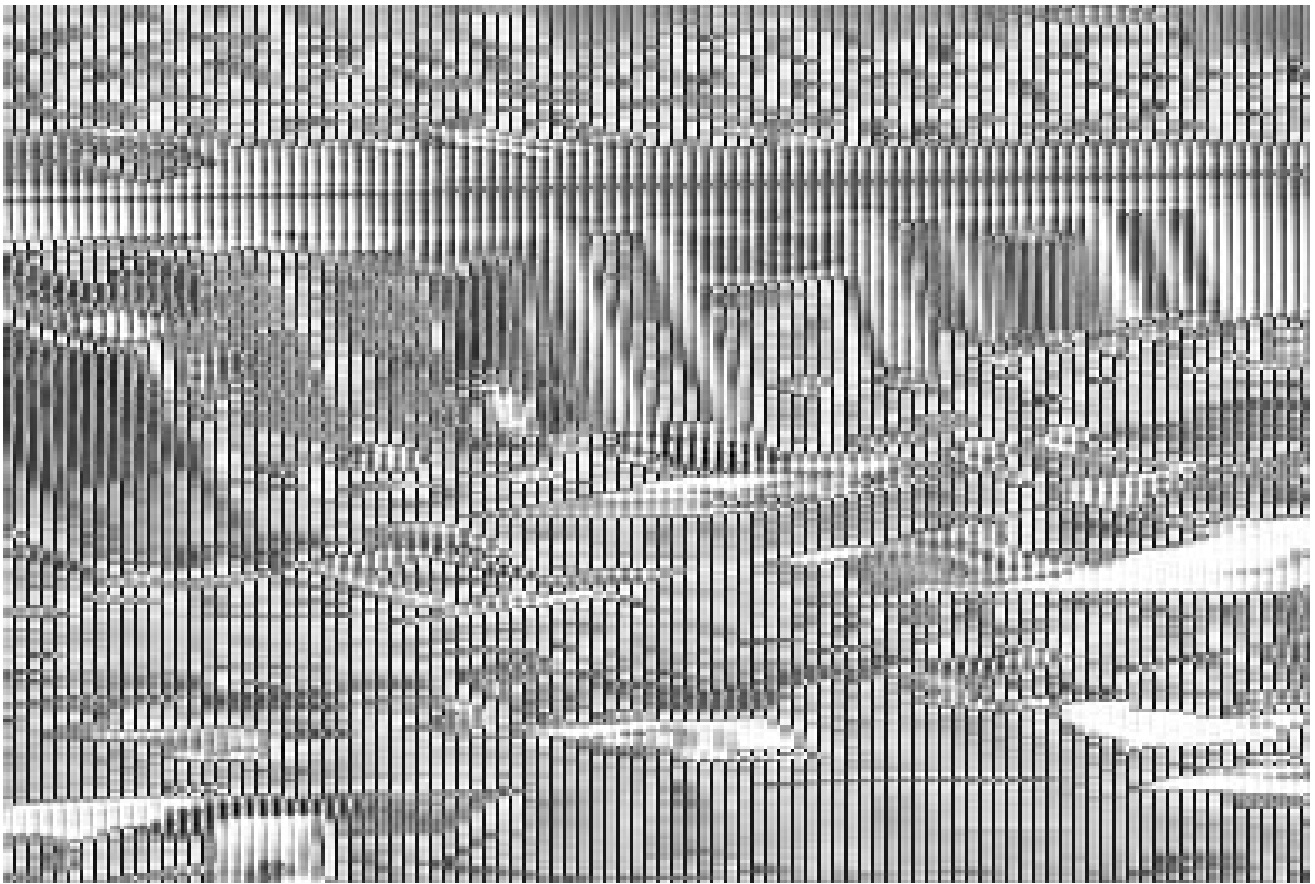


PEOPLE TO KNOW

Monica Lewinsky

White House intern at the center of President Clinton’s impeachment trial that stemmed from sexual misconduct and perjury charges.

However, after receiving a promise of immunity, Lewinsky provided evidence of her affair with Clinton to Starr. Subsequently, the president admitted that he had inappropriate relations with her. He denied, however, that he had lied under oath. In September 1998, Starr reported to the House of Representatives that he believed Clinton had committed perjury. Voting along partisan lines, the House agreed to send articles of impeachment to the Senate, charging Clinton with lying under oath and obstructing justice. The House’s action made Bill Clinton the first president to face impeachment—and possible removal from office—since Andrew Johnson did so in 1867.



Floor proceedings in the U.S. Senate concerning the impeachment of President Bill Clinton took place in early 1999.

The Senate considered the impeachment of Clinton during January and February of 1999. When the final votes were counted on February 12, the totals were 45 (guilty) to 55 (not guilty) on the perjury charge and 50 to 50 on obstruction of justice, short of the two-thirds majority necessary to remove Clinton from office.



BIG IDEA

Although the Senate acquitted President Clinton, the investigation of his relations with Monica Lewinsky indicated that the private lives of government officials had become the subject of increased scrutiny. It also showed that legitimate concerns regarding sexual harassment and sexual misconduct in the workplace could be politicized, dividing people along partisan lines. Although he escaped impeachment, the investigation damaged Clinton's reputation and reduced his ability to accomplish the remainder of his agenda.



SUMMARY

The "culture wars" took on increasingly partisan overtones during the Clinton presidency. During those years, incarceration (particularly the incarceration of Black and minority offenders) and prison construction increased rapidly. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 indicated that racial and economic inequality persisted. Issues related to the sexual revolution, especially gay rights and sexual harassment, entered the political arena. By the late 1990s, the Republican majorities in the House and Senate joined with Clinton to enact the Defense of Marriage Act, which denied federal benefits to same-sex couples. President Clinton's sexual improprieties were investigated by Congress, but he escaped impeachment.

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REFERENCES

Information on California “three-strikes” law, California Courts, Retrieved from bit.ly/2qNU3MI



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TERMS TO KNOW

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