

The Culture Wars of the 1980s

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, members of the New Right hoped the federal government would dismantle the legacy of the liberal establishment, particularly economic regulations and the sexual revolution. As economic conservatives worked to reduce government involvement (in the economy), social conservatives sought to increase government involvement (to limit artistic expression, prevent abortions, and limit gay rights). Together, the battles between the New Right and the liberal establishment became known as the “culture wars.” In these wars, identity politics were contested on a number of fronts.

This tutorial examines the culture wars of the 1980s in four parts:

1. The “Culture Wars”

One of the most effective advertisements during President Reagan’s reelection campaign in 1984 included the following:

“It’s morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?”

This ad depicted the 1980s as a period of renewal. Thanks in part to **Ronald Reagan’s** economic policies, **stagflation** had subsided and the incomes of many Americans had risen. This progress reinforced the hope that the United States would remain a great nation.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ronald Reagan

Conservative Republican president from 1981 to 1989 whose support of tax cuts, deregulation, reduced spending on social programs, hard-line anti-communism, and conservative social policies earned him the loyalty of the “New Right.”



TERM TO KNOW

Stagflation

High inflation combined with high unemployment and slow economic growth.

However, others argued that the 1980s were a time when preexisting divisions—along the lines of class, race,

gender, and sexual orientation—widened. Efforts to censor popular music and to limit abortions, as well as the controversies related to the AIDS crisis, are evidence of the “**culture wars**.”



TERM TO KNOW

Culture Wars

Social and political conflicts between conservative and liberal values in the United States during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

2. “Greed Is Good”

The free-market principles and individualism celebrated by the Reagan administration and the New Right during the 1980s contributed to a growing belief in the value of personal wealth acquisition. The president’s commitment to deregulation, including the deregulation of the financial industry, created opportunities for individual prosperity.

Financial deregulation was not without consequences, however. In 1982, President Reagan signed a bill that increased the amount of federal insurance available to savings-and-loan (S&L) associations to \$100,000. Subsequent legislation allowed S&Ls to engage in a range of loan and investment activities.



DID YOU KNOW

A savings-and-loan (S&L) association is a financial institution that accepts savings deposits and provides loans, including mortgages and car loans, to members.

This legislation gave S&Ls many of the same capabilities as banks without subjecting them to the same level of federal oversight, including the **Glass-Steagall Banking Act** that was enacted during the New Deal.



TERM TO KNOW

Glass-Steagall Banking Act

Prohibited commercial banks from engaging in investment banking; created the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), which insured personal bank deposits up to \$2,500.

By the mid-1980s, the heads of many S&L associations were engaging in suspect, risky investments involving business mergers and real estate. Some of these investments did not do well. As a result, some S&Ls collapsed, and the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation, which insured depositor accounts, went bankrupt. The federal government had to bail out many of these associations.



DID YOU KNOW

According to one estimate, these bailouts totaled \$161 billion.

The rapid rise and spectacular collapse of the S&L industry was one instance in which “Reaganomics,” which emphasized free enterprise and deregulation, led to the enrichment of a few at the expense of many. The greed of some S&L officers destroyed their industry, but a similar focus on wealth and material gain extended throughout American society during the 1980s. In 1984, *Newsweek* magazine coined a term to describe a new generation that focused their lives on wealth acquisition and consumption: **yuppies**.



TERM TO KNOW

Yuppies

Derived from (y)oung, (u)rban (p)rofessionals; individuals who celebrated materialism and were

obsessed with personal image.

Yuppies were, in one way, similar to the *hippies* associated with the **counterculture** of the 1960s and 1970s; their interests, values, and lifestyles were an alternative to those of mainstream Americans.



TERM TO KNOW

Counterculture

A culture that developed in opposition to liberalism and traditional expectations.

Unlike the hippies, however, yuppies were “young, urban professionals” who were highly involved with consumerism, comfort, and individual prosperity. Some worked as venture capitalists or traded on Wall Street and drove BMW and Mercedes automobiles. They valued connections to those who had similar goals and lifestyles above links to family, friends, and neighbors.

➞ **EXAMPLE** *The Art of the Deal*, the autobiography of real estate magnate Donald Trump, was a national bestseller in 1988. In it, Trump provided a step-by-step formula to achieve individual success; celebrated his real estate achievements; and proudly noted, “Deals are my art form” (p. 1).

Liberal critics believed that the self-centered individualism of yuppies was cancerous to American society. However, many others admired those who acquired wealth, associating their success with the “American Dream” and American traditions of individual property ownership and independence.



DID YOU KNOW

The average compensation for the highest-paid CEOs in America increased from \$3 million in 1980 to \$12 million by 1988.

The celebration of wealth, and the spectacular increase in CEO compensation, was in stark contrast to the rise in homelessness during the 1980s.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The number of homeless people in the United States doubled during the 1980s, from 200,000 to 400,000.

President Reagan once stated that many homeless people chose to live on the street. However, the reality was more complex. A number of factors led to the rise in homelessness, including the reduced funding of welfare programs and job losses due to deindustrialization.

3. “Parental Advisory”

The New Right, particularly the Moral Majority and other evangelical groups, supported Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party because they believed that “traditional family values” (i.e., heterosexual two-parent households headed by husbands) were under siege as a result of the sexual revolution. *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States, was of particular concern to social conservatives.



DID YOU KNOW

Religious opponents of *Roe v. Wade* included the Roman Catholic church, which opposed abortion under any circumstance, and evangelical Protestant denominations, which taught that life began at the moment of conception.

Supporters of abortion, who insisted upon a woman’s “right to choose,” were opposed by an increasingly vocal and militant antiabortion movement during the 1980s.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1987, some antiabortion advocates joined Operation Rescue—an organization that used sit-ins and other activities to block access to abortion clinics. Some antiabortion activists resorted to violence—bombing clinics and intimidating doctors who performed abortions.

Although social conservatives were unable to overturn *Roe v. Wade* in the federal courts, antiabortion advocates continued to mobilize at the state and local levels. The legal right to an abortion remained in effect, but the nation continued to be divided by the issue.

Another notable battle during the “culture wars” began in 1985 with the founding of the **Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC)**.



TERM TO KNOW

Parents Music Resource Center

A bipartisan group formed by the wives of federal officials that sought to establish parental control of children’s access to music.

PMRC members included Susan Baker, the wife of President Reagan’s treasury secretary (James Baker), and Tipper Gore, the wife of Democratic Senator (and future Vice President) Al Gore. To prevent children from hearing music that contained sexual or violent content, the PMRC asked the recording industry to adopt a voluntary rating system, similar to the one used by the Motion Picture Association of America for movies.



DID YOU KNOW

The committee issued a list of recordings it deemed offensive, known as the “filthy fifteen.” The list included Madonna’s “Dress You Up,” Twisted Sister’s “We’re Not Gonna Take It,” and Black Sabbath’s “Trashed.”

In August 1985, almost 20 record companies voluntarily agreed to label recordings that contained “explicit lyrics.” Still, the Senate held a hearing on the issue in September.



Tipper Gore at the 1985 Senate hearing regarding the rating system proposed by the PMRC.

While many parents (and a number of witnesses at the September Senate hearing) supported the use of labels, many in the music industry rejected them as censorship.



DID YOU KNOW

Dee Snider from the “hair-metal” band Twisted Sister and folk musician John Denver appeared before the Senate to testify against the restrictions.

The Senate hearing produced an interesting spectacle. It also indicated that, as children increasingly consumed sexually explicit and violent material, many Americans sought to limit their access to it.



DID YOU KNOW

Beginning in November 1985, before the Senate hearing concluded, the Recording Industry Association of America voluntarily began to apply generic “Parental Advisory” labels to explicit material. Whether the labels achieved the results that the PMRC sought is uncertain, but some musicians continue to mock the PMRC for its efforts.

4. “Silence = Death”

Although political figures in Washington, DC, worried about whether children were listening to sexually explicit material, they largely ignored the **HIV/AIDS epidemic**.



TERM TO KNOW

HIV/AIDS Epidemic

A deadly immune deficiency disorder discovered in the United States in 1981; largely ignored by politicians at first because of its prevalence among gay men.

Beginning in the early 1980s, doctors noticed a disturbing trend. Young gay men in large cities, especially San Francisco and New York, were being diagnosed with, and dying from, a rare cancer called Kaposi's sarcoma. Doctors soon realized that the disease coincided with other symptoms, including a rare form of pneumonia. For these reasons, they initially named the disease "Gay-Related Immune Deficiency" (GRID), even though people other than gay men—primarily, intravenous drug users—were also dying from the disease.



DID YOU KNOW

The results of a poll taken during the 1980s indicated that three quarters of all Americans believed that they did not know anyone who was gay.

The connection between gay men and the disease—later renamed human immunodeficiency virus/autoimmune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS)—led some heterosexuals to assume that they were immune (because they were not gay). The connection also led many Americans to ignore the growing health crisis in gay communities. As the disease spread throughout the world, President Reagan rarely spoke about it, and his administration ignored calls for additional funding for research and to find a cure.

Even after it became clear that heterosexuals could contract the disease through blood transfusions, shared needles, and sexual intercourse, some in the Religious Right continued to refer to it as a "gay cancer." Some claimed that HIV/AIDS was a form of divine retribution, punishing homosexuals for their lifestyle.

During the height of the epidemic (i.e., the 1980s and early 1990s), as doctors struggled to understand the disease, an AIDS diagnosis meant certain death to thousands of Americans. By 1985, approximately 5,600 had died from AIDS.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1984, researchers discovered that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was the infectious agent that caused AIDS, but they did not know how to cure it.

As the medical community struggled against AIDS and the federal government continued to offer little support, gay communities organized.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1982, gay men in New York formed the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), a volunteer organization that operated an information hotline provided counseling and legal assistance and raised money to support people with HIV/AIDS.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1987, Larry Kramer (a founding member of the GMHC) formed the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). ACT UP took a militant approach to the crisis, staging demonstrations on Wall Street, outside the office of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and inside the New York Stock Exchange. These demonstrations were intended to call attention to the crisis and to pressure government officials to take action.

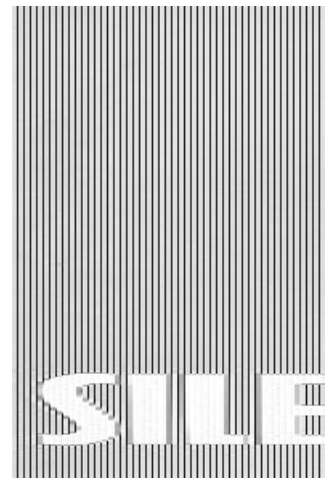
During one ACT UP protest, Larry Kramer said, “AIDS is our Holocaust and Reagan is our Hitler.” The group reinforced this statement by adopting a pink triangle paired with the phrase “Silence = Death” as one of its official images.

The pink triangle was used in Nazi concentration camps to identify those who had been imprisoned for homosexuality. Gay rights activists in New York reused the image during the 1970s to represent solidarity and resistance. During the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, it was a visual condemnation of government inaction and widespread ignorance as thousands died from the disease.



DID YOU KNOW

By the time President Reagan left office in 1989, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) had confirmed over 82,000 AIDS cases and over 46,000 deaths in the United States.



SUMMARY

Attempts to roll back economic regulations and the backlash against the sexual revolution had significant consequences. Economic deregulation enabled affluent Americans, including a new generation known as the “yuppies,” to prosper, while the homeless population increased. Antiabortion activists worked to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, while members of the PMRC sought government-imposed regulation of the music heard by children. The federal government—and the general population—failed to react quickly as the AIDS epidemic swept across the United States. Whether the 1980s was a decade of renewal—or not—depends on one’s background and perspective.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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