America Transformed

Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change, 1941–2001

Born in the Age of Enlightenment, the American nation was committed to what the contemporary French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet called the Idea of Progress. From the beginning, Americans regarded change as both natural and desirable. In some eras it occurred with great speed and was truly transforming, such as during the Industrial Revolution of the last third of the nineteenth century. During the 35 years after America's entry into the Second World War, the country experienced another remarkably rapid and dramatic transformation. Indeed, the manifold changes in areas of American life – ranging from the country's international role and its business structure to Americans' racial and gender relations, their sexual practices, and their regard for privacy – were nothing less than revolutionary. Abrams has drawn on a wealth of mostly published sources on such diverse subjects to offer a fresh, thematically arranged, and often controversial account of that transformation and of the conservative backlash that followed.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521862462

First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Abrams, Richard M.
America transformed : sixty years of revolutionary change, 1941–2001 /
Richard M. Abrams.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-521-86246-9 (hardback)
1. United States – History – 1945– 2. United States – Social
conditions – 1945– 3. Social change – United States – History – 20th century.
4. United States – Politics and government – 1945–1989. I. Title.

E741.A22 2006
973.92 – dc22 2006005049

ISBN-13 978-0-521-86246-2 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-86246-9 hardback

I dedicate this book to my wife, to my children, and to my grandchildren.
May their wonderful capacity for love shield them against troubles.

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Preface

"Revolution" is a strong word, often overused. It implies an overturning of a previous condition or order; a dramatic reversal; a 180-degree turn, or something nearly like it. Yet it is no misuse of the word to describe as revolutionary many changes in American life that occurred during the first quarter-century or so after the United States entered World War II. Most of the changes waxed and endured through the rest of the century, sometimes in the face of strong counterrevolutionary forces. By the end of the century, American society would be transformed at almost every level, from the deeply personal to the far reaches of international engagement.

Nearly all of the revolutions of our half-century owed largely, in some cases mainly, not to great groundswells of grassroots activism but rather to the work of relatively small groups of leaders. "Elites" would not be too pointed a word. They did their work from within some of the least democratic institutions of the country: its universities, its research centers, its corporate boards, its independent regulatory agencies, and its Supreme Court. Most often those leaders challenged the inclinations, and often the opposition, of the nation's democratic or majoritarian forces. That fact would contribute to the counterrevolutionary trends of the last quarter of the century, a central part of the story that this book has to tell.

At the very outset of "our period," precipitously and enduringly the country abandoned its longstanding aloof, unilateral nationalism, its traditional refusal to engage in formal partnership with other nations for joint international purposes. Within a couple of years, America went from isolationism (as its pre–World War II posture is commonly described) to a virtual hegemonic position in international affairs. The aggressive expansion of the fascist powers in Europe and Asia, culminating in Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and Germany's

declaration of war on the United States in December 1941, forced Americans to abandon their aloofness. The challenge of the Soviet Union's postwar ambitions, along with the growing international interests of American business, compelled further U.S. engagement across the globe with implications that affected the entire society, including the robust growth of the American economy.

Indeed, in many respects the most important revolution, the change that had the most profound and widespread effect, was the unprecedentedly swift rise of Americans to affluence. The United States had long been a relatively affluent society; Old World travelers had consistently remarked on it even in the nineteenth century. But the rapidity and dimensions of the *increase* in affluence, beginning with the onset of the Second World War and continuing for the next quarter of a century, constituted something strikingly new, a truly radical change, a revolution in itself that underlay many of the other remarkable changes of the period.

Affluence would contribute significantly to at least three other developments of profound social significance: the transformation of racial relations, the breaching of historic boundaries between male and female roles, and the breaking of virtually all traditional limits on sexual behavior. Each of these changes depended substantially on a sense that its costs were small in an environment of abundance. This was particularly important for the abatement of adverse discrimination against racial minorities. Abundance encouraged a non–zero-sum outlook, so that probably most Americans, at least at the outset, did not view minority gains as impinging on or limiting their own fortunes.

Related to these developments, though perhaps only indirectly, Americans witnessed and experienced a radical erosion of privacy and, more striking, a loss of a *sense* of privacy. That was ironic because, while this was happening, the U.S. Supreme Court for the first time moved to include personal privacy in the constitutional protections afforded by the Bill of Rights. Americans had never been the most private of people. But their much-touted individualism customarily made them cautious about exposure of personal affairs, especially financial and sexual. They were equally cautious about exposing matters concerned with personal health, perhaps from the same squeamishness with which Americans typically approached sex. One spoke of "cancer," for example, only in hushed tones if the word was uttered at all. Money and health, along with sex, were subjects that Americans customarily declined to discuss even with their own children; much less were they subjects for public attention.

For the most part, the custodians of the traditionalist culture insisted that sex was solely for procreation – a sacred, hush-hush procedure even within marriage – and never for recreation. The attitude was reflected in the laws of many states, including of course bans on the sale or purchase of contraceptives. But by the end of the sixties, sex for most Americans became an unquestioned form

of recreation with or without marriage or even romance.[1] Indeed, personal exploits became a popular topic for public discussion, description, and revelation as well as a favorite subject of films and prime-time television programs. As it happened, the sexual revolution helped to dissolve most squeamishness about personal health. By the seventies, Betty Ford, the country's First Lady, and Shirley Temple, Hollywood's onetime icon of adorable innocence, could publicly discuss their mastectomies without embarrassment. Meanwhile, revelations about concealed health problems and conflicts of financial interests among government leaders, including presidents, threw open windows for scrutiny of personal lives across broad sectors of the society. It also helped break through long-accepted media restraints on revealing the personal sexual lives of public figures.

Privacy was further battered by technological innovations that expedited a penetrating surveillance of personal life by both governmental and private agencies. At the same time, television shock shows, along with the Internet, which invited the use of personal computer Web sites, seem to have inspired a craving among Jane and John Does for moments of celebrity. As early as the seventies, most Americans seemed to have surrendered a *desire* for privacy, while shame also faded as a constraining force in public behavior.

The country's radical transformation from unilateral aloofness to global interventionism necessarily forced a sharp break with the nation's traditional rejection of a large, standing military establishment. By the seventies, Americans went so far as to move toward a professional military, discarding conscription and the tradition of a "citizen army" in times of danger in favor of volunteer recruits. Meanwhile, the country's new global role contributed to the radical reconstruction of the American business system, facilitating and stimulating the conglomerate merger and multinational corporate phenomena.

The latter especially followed inexorably from major technological changes that affected the entire world and that accelerated life in many areas. Jet propulsion enabled supersonic passenger travel as well as airborne weaponry and space exploration. The development of computer technology, along with the growing perfection of telephonic and telegraphic communications – including the use of satellites orbiting in space as relay points for the transmission of voice and images

[1] The attitude of American Roman Catholics may be instructive. A Gallup Poll taken in 1965 showed that more than 60 percent expected the pope to approve the Pill for contraceptive purposes. Despite vigorous lobbying by Dr. John Rock, a Catholic and one of the developers of the Pill, Pope Paul VI – in his Encyclical Letter, *Humanae Vitae,* of July 1968 – said No, insisting that the Pill (like abortion, sterilization, condoms, and other forms of contraception) separated the act of sex from procreation, thereby opening the door to mortal sin. Evidently, the pope notwithstanding, most churchgoing Catholics preferred to separate sex from procreation: a poll taken after the Encyclical showed that only 26 percent of American Catholics accepted the pope's view.

almost seamlessly around the globe – dramatically reduced the costs of transferring information, goods, and services. These developments completely changed perceptions of time and space. They forced the globalization of business strategies as they also necessitated a globalization of national security strategies.

The Transformation of Science and Medicine

Medical science and technology underwent spectacular progress during this period. The invention of penicillin just before World War II, soon followed by other antibiotics, provided for the first time an effective and often swift remedy for a wide variety of lethal infections. During the war, death followed from disease and from wounds with only a fraction of the frequency that it did in previous wars. Dangerous streptococcus and other bacterial infections – including scarlet fever, some venereal diseases, and even tuberculosis and leprosy, long terrible scourges of humankind – all but surrendered to the might of modern antibiotics. Preventive immunizations made great progress against other scourges such as bubonic plague, tetanus, cholera, malaria, measles, diphtheria, typhoid fever, and, most stunningly, poliomyelitis, commonly known by the descriptive and dreaded phrase, "infantile paralysis." Smallpox all but disappeared from the world.

The postwar world also witnessed the transforming effect of chemical contraceptives. Along with, shall we say, the "assurance" against most venereal diseases that penicillin provided, the advent of the Pill (approved in 1960 by the U.S. Federal Drug Administration) contributed to the revolution in sexual behavior. Access to chemical contraceptives also offered the possibility of controlling unwanted pregnancies worldwide that threatened ecological as well as personal disasters – a possibility that, partly for religious and political reasons, enjoyed little realization outside the industrial regions of the world. Other advances in medical techniques and surgery made possible once-unthinkable feats regarding both the conception of life and the conception of sexual identity. By the 1970s, Americans and peoples all over the world would become familiar with transsexual transformations as well as with test-tube babies and surrogate mothers.

The development of anesthetics made possible further phenomenal revolutions in surgical techniques. They permitted organ transplants, implantation of prosthetics, and a wide variety of microsurgical techniques on eyes, nerves, hearts, arteries, and the like that were literally unimaginable before mid-century. Many of these techniques would not have been possible without new technology that went far beyond X-rays for peering at the body beneath the skin and permitting precise, even three-dimensional imaging of soft tissue.

Mind-altering narcotics such as heroin, cocaine, and marijuana had had an ancient history, usually outside the law, but in the last half of the twentieth century pharmaceutical companies reaped megaprofits by inventing various

chemical compounds – many of them similarly addictive – that Americans legally and eagerly consumed for the purpose of altering not merely their mind but even their whole personality. Painkillers, tranquilizers, stimulants, somnolents, hormonal compounds, analgesics, and steroids eased, calmed, energized, empowered, and regulated behavior virtually on demand. They also brought under control often fatal metabolic diseases, such as diabetes and lupus, and did the same for numerous allergies that had produced prolonged misery – and sometimes death – to millions. Death and taxes would still be inevitable, but over the last half of the twentieth century the rates of both, at least in the United States, dramatically declined.

In addition to all this, the discovery of the chemical and physical structure of genes, the fundamental elements of life, opened up the possibility of overcoming "rogue" genetic traits that made individuals susceptible to crippling diseases and offered promise for curing diseases by genetic modification. Indeed, before the end of the century, human beings began to acquire the ability to reshape all life forms and invent new organisms – potentially, to reinvent even themselves.

Such knowledge readily joined with the revolution in computer technology. The invention of the semiconductor and microchips, along with vast progress in electronics and computer technology, gave rise to "biotech" and "genetic engineering." As one expert remarked in 1998, "The marriage of computers and genetic science, in just the last ten years, is one of the seminal events of our age and is likely to change our world more radically than any other technological revolution in history."[2]

Revolutionary as the achievements in medicine, surgery, and biotechnology were, they followed mostly from the internal progress, one might even say the imperatives, of science and technology. In a culture that encouraged curiosity and offered prospects of personal profit, every new discovery and invention impelled further inquiry and development. They deserve full treatment in another book.

The revolutions that I have chosen to focus on in this book entailed changes in policy, attitudes, and behavior. Of course, scientific and technological developments had profound impacts on policy, attitudes, and behavior. As already noted, the availability of penicillin and birth-control pills surely influenced changes in sexual behavior, with implications for gender relations as well. Medical and surgical advances increased longevity, which influenced retirement plans, aged the available workforce, and put strains on pension programs. Computer technology accelerated life. A "slow" personal computer became one that failed to respond reliably to a command in less than two seconds. "Instant gratification" took on

[2] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Biotech Century: Harnessing the Gene and Remaking the World* (Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), p. xvi.

new meaning as digital clocks measured time in tenths of a second. Before the end of the century, the use of hormones, antibiotics, and gene manipulation accelerated wool growing, tree growing, vegetable growing, milk producing, and hog, poultry, and cattle raising – with profound effects on farming as a way of life, on the marketing of agricultural goods worldwide, and on the politics of world trade. The residue of hormones in milk from treated cattle feed may also have speeded the onset of puberty, especially among young girls. These are some of the effects of science and technology that bear upon the subjects in this book.

Even the most beneficent of changes produce some unwanted effects. Science and technology helped bring about unprecedented prosperity for Americans but also some problems. The problems included a gap in mentality, in social outlook, between the generation that was born after 1945 and their parents, a schism that induced for many a deep alienation, something of a mutual incomprehension. The problems also included the revolution in expectations among peoples previously out of touch with the possibilities for improved lives that global electronic communications introduced them to but that remained enragingly elusive. The medical advances also helped produce a dramatic reduction in infant mortality and an increase in longevity, but with the consequence of unprecedented population increases in regions that were politically and economically incapable of supporting them. That would be one ingredient in the rise of resentful frustration among millions of people worldwide. By the end of the century, the United States would become a target for such resentment because of its inability, and also its unwillingness, to fulfill the hopes that its own progress had inspired. There were, to be sure, other reasons.

As the century drew to a close, these were global problems about which most Americans generally knew little and – if their political behavior indicated their prevailing attitude – cared less. For a brief period in the middle of the half-century, many Americans confronted and acted to deal with some of the downsides of the progress they were experiencing. But the Sixties[3] proved to be an exceptional era, not typical of the whole. For most Americans who experienced the sixty years of revolutionary change from World War II to the end of the century, life became easier, richer, healthier, and longer. But the pace of economic growth and the spread of affluence through the social strata slowed nearly to a halt by the mid-seventies. So, too, did Americans' attention to social problems abroad and at home. Throughout the last quarter of the century, American politics reflected a cranky resentment of the attention given in the Sixties to those for whom life too nearly remained, as Thomas Hobbes had described it in the seventeenth century, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

[3] I use "the sixties" to denote the decade 1960–1969 but use "the Sixties" to describe the era (and ethos) of the period from 1963 to 1973.

One important clue to the turnabout may involve the peculiar force behind the revolutions. That is, most of them primarily resulted not from an upheaval of democratic activism but from the leadership of relatively small groups of liberal men and women who commanded strategic positions in business, education, and government. Although much of the agitation for reform arose with chants of "power to the people," in fact if "the people" – that is, the majority of Americans – had had their way, little would have happened toward enlarging civil rights, civil liberties, sexual freedom, women's rights, the quality of life for the poor, the monitoring of business practices on behalf of consumer interests and the environment, or perhaps even the global expansion of American business. The same could be said, of course, about the medical miracles that owed to the work of a relatively small number of brilliant and hardworking scientists, mathematicians, engineers, and technicians.

By the last quarter of the century, as the economy slowed, as American international leadership underwent challenges from old and new industrial powers, as American government lost respect at home following the Watergate scandals and the fiasco of U.S. intervention in Indochina, and as the dramatic changes in social practices and perceptions began to sink in, a backlash arose among Americans that produced a full-blown counterrevolution. That was in turn led by a militantly conservative intellectual and business elite that mobilized the latent democratic passions while making its way into the Republican Party, in much the same way that liberals had shaped Democratic Party politics earlier.

But I do not wish to engage the sprawling literature about "ruling classes," "power elites," and the like. I acknowledge that in some ways my approach resembles that of John Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), and John Kenneth Galbraith's *The New Industrial State* (1967). Each author in his own way makes the argument that policy making follows vectors determined by specialists, top political and business leaders, and bureaucrats, and that economic class analysis is of lesser use in understanding the direction of change. But I do not intend to contribute to a literature that implies some more or less permanent "ruling class" that overrides democratic processes for the purpose of oppressing "the rest of us." Some thoughtful recent essays that attempt to revive the importance of such analysis may be found in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstel (eds.), *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy* (2005).[4] There is on the other hand a growing interest in the opposition of democratic forces to liberalism (a consideration that

[4] John Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (John Day, 1941); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford University Press, 1956); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1967); Steve Fraser & Gary Gerstel, eds., *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2005). See also Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (Broadway, 2002).

may be traced back to Tocqueville). Fareed Zakaria's *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (2003), for example, has much to say about how democratic forces alive in the world today are anything but liberal. Zakaria notes well how democratic forces abroad, especially popular religious forces, make for poor prospects for the liberalization of autocracies around the globe. As for the United States, he highlights the extraordinary rise of politically oriented Protestant evangelicalism and its profoundly negative impact on liberal politics and sensibilities.

In an important way, the surge of modern, political evangelicalism comes from the same generational schism to which I have already alluded. "The fundamentalist involvement in politics," Zakaria observes, "is best understood as a response to [the] weakening of its religious authority and base." In response to popular disinterest in the "don'ts" that were the core of traditional fundamentalism, the new evangelicals exploited the access to mass followings afforded by television, borrowed commercial techniques for attracting followers, and emphasized a "do your own thing" brand of religion. "The key feature of all successful and growing mass Christian sects today," Zakaria writes, "is an emphasis on individual choice and democratic structures." In short: "All it takes to be a fundamentalist these days is to watch the TV shows, go to the theme parks, buy Christian rock, and vote Republican."[5] Co-opted by the militantly conservative business and political elite, these democratic forces contributed in a major way to the ascendancy of the Republican Party during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Effects of the Revolutions

The sweeping rapidity of change that a mere two generations of Americans experienced produced a society deeply divided, even fragmented. When the American economy shifted in the 1970s from high to low growth and from virtually full employment and rising real median income to substantial percentages of unemployment and underemployment, the elites whose energies and ideas inspired most of the change could not hold the center together. They could not defend politically against the resentments that built up in the democracy over the perceived costs of the changes. By the last quarter of the century, the nation experienced a major breakdown of any consensus on standards or even on a definition of virtue. Nor, it appeared, was there a common vision of a model of "the Good Society." Most of the moral anchors that had held the society together during the comparably transforming decades of a century earlier had pulled loose, leaving large sections of the American polity to drift apart and leaving government to founder amid doubts as to its legitimacy.

[5] Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom* (Norton, 2003), pp. 214–15.

The collapse of a consensus, a long time coming since even the First World War, underlay some paradoxical historical developments during "our period." One such paradox is how America's "war on poverty" that the country's policy makers launched in the sixties amidst one of the most prosperous eras in U.S. history turned into what many called "a war against the poor" in the mostly prosperous last quarter of the century. After the Watergate scandal and the ignominious demise of a conservative Republican presidency, one might have expected a rejuvenation of the progressive politics that underlay the achievements of the Sixties. Instead, Americans seemed beset by a mood of failure. In the face of remarkable achievements in reducing the miseries of poverty, of a spectacular broad-based rise in Americans' standard of living, of unprecedented progress in equitable gender and racial relations, of international ascendancy and the successful containment of Soviet expansion, of the containment of the damages that industrialization inflicted on the environment and human health – in the face of such remarkable successes, a widespread *failure syndrome* developed that expressed denial of all that had been gained. The defeat of the liberal internationalists' effort to thwart a communist takeover of Indochina had much to do with it, but the collapse of the political coalition that had achieved so much requires more comprehensive attention (and is treated in Part III).

* * *

In writing this book, I have relied mostly on secondary sources: the rich, voluminous, and ever-growing work of scholars who have done primary-source research on a broad range of specialized subjects. In planning the book, I knew there was no way I could gain fundamental expertise of my own in more than one or two of the areas that needed attention. There were, meanwhile, hundreds of excellent works available on the multitude of particular subjects relevant to my inquiries and upon which I could safely rely for hard information. I have, however, also depended greatly on my own careful reading of scores of contemporary popular and scholarly journals and of daily newspapers over a fifty-year period, as well as on some "primary" investigations of my own. I have attempted to support with footnotes all data, statements, quotations, and the like that are cited in the book, but I have deliberately kept the footnotes to a minimum. I have chosen not to pad the footnotes with every source that could support the same point made in the text, but the notes do provide guidance for any reader who wishes to refer to a source or to an alternative interpretation of materials.

The book represents more than a half-century of reflections on the human condition with particular reference to the history of the United States during that period. It is organized thematically rather than chronologically. Each chapter, as it focuses on a particular subject, follows a chronology of its own, but the book as a whole does not present a chronological narrative. What I have to say

about the years of the presidencies of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan through those of the first George Bush and Bill Clinton is well signaled in the previous sections, although because of its pivotal importance I have included a more focused section on "the Reagan revolution." The Epilogue concludes with some reflections on the remarkable postmillennium developments.

The book is designed for any reader – a high-school or college student, or simply any history buff – who possesses a bit more than a bare survey knowledge of the last half of twentieth-century U.S. history. It offers a particular approach to understanding the stunningly rapid and complex transformations of American life in that brief period of time.

I am aware that the subject matter I discuss remains a source of considerable controversy. Indeed, one part of the book's story is the increasing polarization of views among Americans on many vital social and economic issues. I have not attempted to conceal my own preferences, and I confess that those preferences are decidedly of the liberal sort. I take my cues from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when a few thinkers – mostly in Western Europe and North America – introduced an argument (barely acknowledged at the time) for a universalist conception of human beings and suggested that the proper function of government is to serve the enhancement of individual freedom and human welfare regardless of nationality, race, religious affinity, or sexual identity. But I am no political partisan. I owe allegiance to no political party or movement. I have attempted to present a balanced account of the diverse forces that have competed for advantage and for input into policy, recognizing that in most cases there were more than two sides to every controversy. I do not expect that every, or any, reader will find my take on the many controversies of the last half-century to be entirely agreeable, but I do hope that readers will find my presentation to be clear, reasonable, nontendentious, and informative.

Acknowledgments

Much of the information in this book was gleaned from hundreds of monographs. I owe a great debt to the innumerable scholars whose careful research informed my work. I am indebted also to the many thousands of students who inspired me with questions and challenges during nearly a half-century of teaching in New York, in Berkeley, and in many cities abroad. Many friends and family members have read all or parts of the work in progress, and their comments have led to several versions of the book over the years including this final, hopefully more perfect, version. I want to thank especially friends and colleagues David Brody, Robin Einhorn, Edwin Epstein, Patrick Lloyd Hatcher, and Alan Holder, who read all or parts of the manuscript at different stages. I owe a debt also to the anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press who read the manuscript with a critical eye and took the time to make dozens of valuable suggestions and some corrections. Carl Degler and James H. Jones revealed themselves to me as confidential reviewers, kindly offering me their advice for improving the manuscript that they endorsed for publication. My wife, Marcia, and my children, Laura, Robby, and Jennifer read all or parts of many versions of the book with keen eyes and helpful comments. Finally, I have valued the encouragement and advice of senior editor Lew Bateman at Cambridge and of copy-editor Matt Darnell, who scrutinized the manuscript with extraordinary attention for stylistic correctness, clarity, and consistency. Since I did not always accept their suggestions, none of the individuals mentioned here deserves any blame for whatever errors or misstatements appear.