

The United States of America is regarded as the Land of Opportunity, serving as a message of light for democracies all over the world. At least, that's how it used to be. So, what's different now? Simply put, the United States has begun to gaze backward, to a time when profiteers and a small elite controlled the majority of the money and political power.

It's a well-known tale. A strong elite has amassed much too much wealth for themselves, while the rest of the population struggles. Countless Americans now must be asking what happened to their magnificent nation, as they struggle to obtain stable employment, housing, and health care. That's exactly what these chapters will reveal, as they look into the murky conspiracies, key political players, and economic philosophies that have brought the US to its current position.

In the following chapters, you'll learn

- how nostalgia in the United States heralded the death of progressive politics;
- why liberals have become jaded; and
- why we're still stuck in the 1980s in a very genuine sense.

## Chapter 1 - The United States of America has become increasingly nostalgic – and static – ever since the end of the 20th century.

America used to be known as the "country of the future." It aspired to new adventures, leaving behind Europe's ancient monarchs and customs. New faiths, technologies, and businesses grew in popularity.

Think of space flight, rock & roll, and the struggle for equality as examples of dramatic transformation in the twentieth century. However, at the close of the twentieth century, this movement for modernity began to wane.

This was originally discovered by author Kurt Andersen in 2007 when he came upon a newspaper image from twenty years before. The photograph depicted a group of fashionable individuals standing on a metropolitan street in the United States. He observed how similar they appeared to individuals in 2007 when he looked at their clothing and hairdo.

He had an insight as a result of this. In 2007, he noticed how very little had significantly changed since 1987 when he looked at automobiles, clothes, music, and style. In 2007, there was very nothing that looked or sounded new, apart from mobile phones and computers.

The twentieth century, on the other hand, saw the emergence of one fundamentally new cultural period after another. Consider the tremendous shift from 1955 to 1965: the 1960s' personal liberty music and dress were a world apart from the 1950s' staid conventions. So, what's changed?

Simply put, America has rejected the new in favor of nostalgia. The trend for nostalgia started in the 1970s. Following the tremendous upheavals of the 1960s, a sizable portion of the American people began to yearn silently for the past or more precisely, an imaginary past, in which everything felt more predictable and secure.

*Grease*, *American Graffiti*, and *Happy Days*, all set in romanticized versions of the 1950s and early 1960s, were all hugely popular at the time.

As we've progressed farther into the twenty-first century, the yearning for nostalgia in the United States hasn't waned. Apart from technical advancements, cultural transformation appears to remain stalled. Designs from different eras of the twentieth century are still being replicated in fashion, music, and style. It's nice to be vintage.

What is the significance of this? It represents a wider stalemate that extends beyond fashion and music. It indicates that both economically and politically, America is caught in a time portal. And, given the country's challenges, such as poverty and global warming, it can't be looking back.

## Chapter 2 – Nostalgia paved the way for economic equality.

The United States became a sophisticated, center-left nation that cared about its inhabitants when President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented the New Deal in 1932. The New Deal aided in the creation of stable jobs with decent annuities, as well as relief for the destitute and jobless.

In the 1960s, when Lyndon B. Johnson's administration brought in a flood of progressive ideas, it appeared that the economic right's ideals were on the decline. Anyone who advocated for corporate tax cuts or welfare cuts was regarded as a weird, fringe figure.

But, just as nostalgia for the past began to creep in, the right sensed an opening.

The right began preparing their return after suffering setback after defeat on the ideological front. The affluent, right-wing elites were worried that their advantages would be taken away permanently as the radical politics of the 1960s became more mainstream. However, as huge protests against the Vietnam War and for human rights erupted, they saw a chance to appeal to Americans who were concerned about the turmoil.

It all started with right-wing Republican Barry Goldwater's presidential election campaign in 1964, when he was defeated by Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson in a majority. Despite the fact that he lost, he established a campaign approach that would prove effective in the future. He juxtaposed pictures of modest American life with pictures of adolescents dancing to rock and roll, Black people singing in the streets, and fast automobiles flying by in his half-hour campaign commercial. He attempted to appeal to people's longing for a romanticized past that was threatened by modernity.

However, as the 1980s came, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan used nostalgia to great effect in his campaign. Instead of emphasizing his right-wing economic plans, Reagan concentrated on a picture of America in the past. Reagan personified this notion of an idealized, gone past as a former Hollywood star of the 1940s.

It was an ingenious plan. The policies of the New Deal were still supported by the majority of Americans. They were certainly not in favor of reducing taxes on the affluent or repealing environmental and labor safeguards, all of which were part of Reagan's platform. Instead, he concentrated on what they did enjoy. And what they admired was white-picket-fence America, with its huge lawns, gables, and newspaper boys — nice, fuzzy memories.

Reagan was elected president in 1980. Following his triumph came the economic plans that the wealthy, right-wing elites had expected for a long time.

## Chapter 3 - In the 1970s, two men, Milton Friedman and Lewis Powell were key figures in the economic right's comeback.

There were a few key players on the Republican right as they prepared their comeback. These were folks who had watched the 1960s unfold with horror as public opinion swung against big business and the wealthy. Despite the fact that their economic views were rejected for decades, they persisted. They waited for the perfect opportunity to strike.

These individuals would play crucial roles in the economic response.

Milton Friedman, an economics professor at the University of Chicago, was the very first. Friedman released an article that would affect the future in the fall of 1970 when it appeared that progressives had won all of the economic debates. The piece, titled “A Friedman theory - The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits,” was published in the New York Times Magazine and claimed that corporations should have no other obligations but to accumulate profit.

Friedman's essay argued for and mocked CEOs who sought social obligations, which he saw as a cover for anti-capitalism. Most of the progressiveness of the time was challenged by the article, which provided a stark opposing viewpoint.

What's more, guess what? Friedman was backed by a slew of affluent CEOs and executives. They were fed up with being mocked by the liberals who controlled public discourse. To them all, Friedman's essay was a huge middle finger. Many of these executives absorbed every word he spoke, and the book went on to impact corporate boardrooms for the following five decades. Friedman's ideas impacted the policy of Ronald Reagan, the next Republican President.

Lewis Powell, a prominent Virginia lawyer, was the second prominent player. He proposed a specific plan to the US Chamber of Commerce in 1971, concerned by the anti-capitalist atmosphere of the 1960s, to counteract what he viewed as disruptive left-wing groups.

He suggested a plan to infiltrate and sway academics, the media, politics, and the judicial system in this essay. Powell argued that the economic right might need resources never seen before in political campaigning to accomplish this. Companies that wish to defend themselves against liberal legislation can give to think tanks, professors, and friendly media that promote the right-wing economic models. The twenty-first century is upon us.

Friedman and Powell, in their own views, were pivotal figures in the rise of the new right.

## Chapter 4 - In order to win power, the right borrowed some of their political opponents' methods.

You certainly have a few pictures in mind when you think of the radical aspects of the 1960s. Maybe you saw LSD-addicted hippies at Woodstock. Maybe you envision student demonstrators protesting against the government or anti-nuclear campaign posters and shouts.

Surprisingly, the opponents of all of this extremism — the republicans we saw in earlier blinks — ended up adopting some of its concepts and political strategies.

The new conservative movement, rather than portraying themselves as stodgy, old-fashioned conservatives, soaked into the spirit of the period. Consider, for example, 1960s ultra-individualism. People, particularly young people, reacted to postwar America's conformism by becoming even more individualistic during those days. While hippies were discovering their own realities and discovering their own freedoms, the fresh crop of right-wingers, such as Milton Friedman, urged his followers to do the same.

Friedman urged them not to be embarrassed by their ambition to get rich or to chase money without regard for social responsibility. They must, like the hippies, do what feels right to them. And besides, libertarianism, as this type of low-tax economics was known, was all about individual liberty.

The level of distrust of government was another feature of the 1960s and 1970s that the right inherited. After the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair, public confidence in the government — and authority in general — was at an all-time low.

This was completely in line with the right's economic narrative, which held that the government should be kept as far away from people's lives as possible. As a result, rather than refuting public perceptions of government corruption, they bolstered it. They desired a state pullback and extensive deregulation, allowing companies to operate as they pleased.

"Government is not the answer to our problems; government is the problem," Ronald Reagan remarked in his inaugural speech.

Lastly, in an image of the liberal activists, there were some, such as Virginia lawyer Lewis Powell, who attempted to portray affluent businesspeople as victims. "The American business executive is truly the forgotten man," he remarked, echoing, in a strange and perverted way, the words of those fighting for minorities' rights.

Each of these cynical methods aided the libertarian right's cause, culminating in the libertarian right's major triumphs in the 1980s.

## Chapter 5 - The triumph of the American right is largely due to leftist apathy.

It may have seemed to American liberals at one point that they had won most political fights. The New Deal's rationale, with its guaranteed jobs, powerful labor unions, and inadequate relief, had become ingrained in American culture. And, while there was still work to be done in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, progress had been achieved.

As a result, American liberals got complacent — and let their guard down — after the 1960s.

Let's just go back to the nostalgia we've previously discussed. Liberals were not the only ones who turned to nostalgia when they were afraid of the extremism of the 1960s. Many people, including many rich liberals, began to imitate previous styles and practices as a type of eccentricity throughout the 1980s. For example, rather than enjoying the sophisticated, cosmopolitan cuisine suddenly accessible in the United States, many people began to resort to "comfort food" — classic American home-cooking, half-jokingly.

Even though the love of comfort food appeared to be a harmless trend, it concealed something more serious: many people, especially liberals, yearned for a simpler time. A time when things were less radical, more stable, and more white.

The success of a book titled *The Official Preppy Handbook*, which not only satirized but also popularized the antiquated practices of affluent white college students, demonstrates this inclination.

Liberals' ironic embracing of nostalgia helped the attitude become popular. As a result, right-wing politicians like Ronald Reagan were highly effective in appealing to such nostalgia.

Following the 1960s, several liberals were disillusioned with organized labor, which were not always open in their support for minorities and women. Indeed, many liberals regarded labor unions to be rife with anti-Semitism. As a result, when the political right attempted to dismantle unions in the 1980s, there was little sympathy for them, and many liberals were relieved to see them leave. And with that, another line of defense against the corporate elite was broken.

Later, to demonstrate how open-minded and generous they were, several liberal outlets and organizations provided room for the right's new ideals. Richard Nixon's right-wing speechwriter, William Safire, was recruited as a columnist by the New York Times. Robert Nozick and Martin Feldstein, two luminaries of the emerging right-wing movement, were hired as professors at Harvard. To top it off, Milton Friedman and his mentor, Friedrich Hayek, received Nobel Prizes in Economics. These right-wingers have infiltrated the liberal majority from the margins.

Because of this complacency, Ronald Reagan found no opposition to his most extreme changes when he was elected to the presidency.

## Chapter 6 - The political changes ushered in by the economic right in the 1980s continue to have an impact on the United States today.

We've demonstrated that the 1980s in America were a watershed period for capitalism, allowing pure greed to run wild.

However, beneath the decade's extravagance, the economic right imposed a slew of more subtle changes, the repercussions of which we are still feeling today. In many respects, the 1980s were never quite over.

After Reagan's election, the economic right ideology became more mainstream. The beliefs of people like Milton Friedman became popular, as we saw in the last chapter. Almost immediately, some standards were radically altered. Rather than being wary of greed and large business, as was formerly the case, many individuals today openly applaud greed and show reverence to industry.

What caused this to happen? Recall how we talked about the right's silent planning earlier? They began a huge campaign in academics, the media, politics, and the judicial system in the 1970s. This program had begun to yield results by the 1980s. It had taken a very long time, but the right's ideals had finally had an impact on the general population.

Many other changes that happened in the 1980s were mundane and routine, but they had long-term consequences for the United States.

First, Reagan's government began "forgetting" to update some rules and regulations in a discreet manner. This meant that problems like labor law breaches, for example, were overlooked. It suggested that CEOs could give themselves business shares without having it count against their pay. It entailed minor changes to tax legislation that shielded the rich from having to pay higher Social Security levies.

These may have appeared insignificant at the time, but they added up to a significant amount. The overall impact was to favor the affluent and large businesses at the expense of everyone else's rights and safeguards.

The economic right then attempted to alter the judiciary in the 1980s. They realized they couldn't count on a friendly president or Congress indefinitely; they needed to make more permanent changes. As a result, they attempted to penetrate the legal community by assembling a group of like-minded, right-wing attorneys. The Federalist Society, founded in 1982 by the right, campaigned for conservative ideas and recommended Supreme Court choices for Republican presidents.

They eventually succeeded in enshrining republican policies in the Supreme Court, views that saw the solid free-market economy as a part of America's legal Constitution. The economic right had made another huge step toward consolidating their control, this time by stealth.

## Chapter 7 - The development of financial liberalization was one of the outcomes of the right's wins in the 1980s.

The emergence of the classic Wall Street shark coincided with the 1980s. The sharks are typified by Gordon Gekko, an unempathetic financier who proclaims, "Greed is good," in the 1987 film Wall Street.

A figure like Gekko represents a shift in the US economic system, as well as representing the greed of the 1980s. Previously, the country's economy was centered on creating and manufacturing goods; currently, a large portion of the economy is dependent solely on financial speculation.

The investment of the American economy was the result of this. But it had been fueled in great measure by the Republican right's economic agenda.

The ramifications of this financial liberalization were numerous. The most evident is a willingness to take risks. When Ronald Reagan was elected, he significantly reduced capital gains taxes, allowing investors to keep more of their earnings. This resulted in a massive increase in share prices from 1982 onwards, as many individuals regarded the stock market as a rapid means to become extremely wealthy. As a result, investors flocked to the market, gaining and losing billions of dollars.

However, the danger did not end there. Working-class Americans could borrow on credit cards and take out hazardous loans easier than ever before because of Reagan's deregulation initiatives. As a result, many people who were already struggling to make ends meet ended themselves in massive debt.

Eventually, in the twentieth century, the same deregulation cleared the path for even more risk-taking. This was accomplished by the employment of progressively disassociated financial tools from actual companies and commodities. Those were all high-risk derivatives that had little to do with real-world investments.

Firms themselves were being hollowed out by a concentration on the stock market at the same time. The concept of value for shareholders became significant, which meant that firms became concerned with maximizing short-term shareholder profits rather than addressing their long-term destiny.

The investment of the 1980s transformed a country known for its inventiveness into a consumerist society. It transformed an industrial culture into a massive casino, in which average Americans became deeply in debt and the affluent became even richer via speculation.

## Chapter 8 - If America is to avoid a dismal future, it must drastically transform.

For many Americans today, the economic right's long campaign has led to a more insecure existence, with stable employment, housing, and health care becoming increasingly difficult to come by. They have a Raw Deal instead of Roosevelt's New Deal.

Furthermore, the future appears to be frightening. In the worst-case scenario, people will become obsolete in a more computerized workplace, while the wealthy would benefit from the revenues.

The future decades will be nightmarish if things continue down this road, with much more authority and privileges being given to wealthy companies.

Another future, though, is possible. The technology has the potential to liberate Americans. People may be freed up to spend more time doing the things they want to do and excel at if monotonous, boring occupations were delegated to robots. In reality, Amazon and Walmart's massive warehouses already employ computerized assistance, which executes sorting tasks far more quickly than a human could.

That's all fine and good, but what about the laid-off workers? What will they do to pay the bills? As productivity rises due to automation, there may be enough collective wealth for everyone to enjoy secure and happy lives. As a result, the answer is a universal basic income. Each American will be protected from the consequences of the automation revolution by receiving a lump sum payment every month to meet their living expenses.

And, fortunately, something quite similar is already in operation in the United States. This is the Alaskan oil payout, which pays out a variable amount to each Alaskan based on the state's rich oil industry revenues. While not quite a universal basic income, it does provide some insight into what happens to those who receive such a government stipend. The outcomes are encouraging. Instead of quitting their jobs, many individuals have taken on extra responsibilities, particularly women with children who can now afford daycare. Furthermore, the additional money has resulted in improved overall nutrition, fewer underweight babies, and the lifting out of the poverty of a third of Alaska's Native inhabitants.



America has two options: continue down the path established by the economic right, which will lead to more inequality and unhappiness, or drastically reform. America must once again confront the future.

## Evil Geniuses: The Unmaking of America by Kurt Andersen Book Review

American culture became nostalgic after the radical politics of the 1960s. The conservatives, which had been losing the economic debate to liberals for decades, saw this as an opportunity. They cashed on on Americans' nostalgia for the "good old days." When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, they implemented radical changes such as deregulation, tax cuts, and reshaping the court to match their goals. Their legacy has had an impact on America right up to the present day.

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