The Rise of Conservatism: Crash Course US History #41

Crash Course: U.S. History
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===== Introduction (0:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course US History, and today we're going to - Nixon?! - we're going to talk about the rise of conservatism.

So Alabama, where I went to high school, is a pretty conservative state and reliably sends Republicans to Washington, like both of its senators Jeff Sessions and Richard Shelby are Republicans. But did you know that Richard Shelby used to be a Democrat?

Just like basically all of Alabama's senators since reconstruction. And this shift from Democrat to Republican throughout the South is the result of the rise of conservative politics in the 1960s and 1970s that we are going to talk about today and along the way, we get to put Richard Nixon's head in a jar. Stan just informed me that we don't actually get to put Richard Nixon's head in a jar, it's just a *Futurama* joke, and now I'm sad.

Now you'll remember from our last episode that we learned that not everyone in the 1960s was a psychedelic, rock-listening, war-protesting hippie. In fact there was a strong undercurrent of conservative thinking, that ran throughout the 1960s, even among young people. And one aspect of this was the rise of free market ideology and libertarianism. Like, since the 1950s a majority of Americans had broadly agreed, that free enterprise was a good thing, and should be encouraged both in the US and abroad.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! And also in deep space where no man has gone before?

No, Me from the Past, you're thinking of the Starship Enterprise not free enterprise. And anyway Me from the Past, you ever seen a more aggressively communist television program than the Neutral Zone from Star Trek: the Next Generation's first season? I don't think so!

(Intro)

===== Types of Conservatism (1:31) =====

Alright, so in the 1950s a growing number of libertarians argue that unregulated capitalism and individual autonomy were the essence of American freedom. And although they weren't staunchly anti-communist their real target was the regulatory state that had been created by the New Deal. You know, social security, and not being allowed to, you know, choose how many pigs you kill etc. Other conservatives weren't libertarians at all, but moral conservatives who were okay with the rules that enforced traditional notions of family and morality, even if that seemed like, you know, an oppressive government. For them virtue was the essence of America.

But both of these strands of conservatism were very hostile toward communism and also to the idea of big government.

And it's worth noting that since World War I, the size and scope of the federal government had increased dramatically. And hostility towards the idea of big government remains the signal feature of contemporary conservatism although very few people actually argue for shrinking the government, because, you know, that would be very unpopular. People like Medicare.

But it was faith in the free market that infused the ideology of the most vocal young conservatives in the 1960s. They didn't receive nearly as much press as their liberal counterparts, but these young conservatives played a pivotal role in reshaping the Republican Party. Especially in the election of 1964.

===== Presidential election of 1964 (2:45)=====

The 1964 presidential election was important in American history, precisely because it was so incredibly uncompetitive. I mean Lyndon Johnson was carrying the torch of a wildly popular American president who had been assassinated a few months before. He was never going to lose. And indeed he didn't, the Republican candidate, Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, was demolished by LBJ.

The mere fact of Goldwater's nomination was a huge conservative victory, I mean he beat out liberal Republican New York governor, Nelson Rockefeller, and yes, there was liberal republicans.

Goldwater demanded a harder line in the Cold War, even suggesting that nuclear war might be an option in the fight against communism. And he lambasted the New Deal liberal welfare state, for destroying American initiative and individual liberty. I mean, why bother working when you can just enjoy life on the dole? I mean unemployment insurance allowed anyone in America to become a hundred-aire.

But it was his stance on the Cold War that doomed his candidacy. In his acceptance speech, Goldwater famously declared: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.", which made it really easy for Johnson to paint Goldwater as an extremist. In the famous Daisy advertisement Johnson's supporters countered Goldwater's campaign slogan of "In your heart you know he's right" with "but in your guts you know he's nuts".

So in the end Goldwater received a paltry 27 million votes to Johnson's 43 million and democrats racked up huge majorities in both houses of Congress.

This hides, however, the significance of the election. Five of the six states, that Goldwater carried were in the deep South, which had been reliably Democratic, known as the "Solid South" in fact. Now it's too simple to say that race alone led to the shift from Democratic to the Republican party in the South, because Goldwater didn't really talk much about race. But the Democrats especially under LBJ became the party associated with defending civil rights and ending segregation. And that definitely played a role in white southerners abandoning the Democratic Party, as was demonstrated even more clearly in the 1968 election.

===== Presidential election of 1968 (4:42) =====

The election of 1968 was a real Cluster Calhoun. I mean there were riots and there was also the nomination of Hubert Humphrey, who was very unpopular with the anti-war movement, and also was named Hubert Humphrey. And that's just what happened with the democrats. But lost in that picture was the Republican nominee Richard Milhous Nixon, who was one of the few candidates in American history to come back and win the presidency after losing in a previous election.

How did he do it? Well it probably wasn't his charm, but it might have been his patience. Nixon was famous for his ability to sit and wait in poker games. It made him very successful during his tour of duty in the South Pacific, in fact he earned the nickname Old Ironbutt. Plus he was anti-communist but didn't talk a lot about nuking people, and the clincher was probably that he was from California, which by the late 1960s was becoming the most popular

state in the nation.

Nixon won the election, campaigning as the candidate of the silent majority of Americans, who weren't anti-war protesters, and who didn't admire free love or the communal ideas of hippies. And who were alarmed at the rights that the Supreme Court seemed to be expanding. Especially for criminals. This silent majority felt that the rights revolution had gone too far, and they were concerned about the breakdown of traditional values and in law and order, stop me if any of this sounds familiar. Nixon also promised to be tough on crime, which was coded language to whites in the South that he wouldn't support civil rights protests. The equation of crime with African Americans has a long and sordid history in the United States, and Nixon played it up following a "Southern strategy" to further draw white democrats, who favored segregation into the Republican ranks.

Now Nixon only won 43% of the vote, but if you paid attention to American history you know that you ain't gotta win a majority to be the President. He was denied that majority primarily by Alabama governor George Wallace who was running on a pro-segregation ticket and won 13% of the vote. So 56% percent of American voters chose candidates there were either explicitly or quietly against civil rights.

===== Nixon's presidency (6:36) =====

Conservatives who voted for Nixon, hoping that he would roll back the New Deal, were disappointed. I mean, in some ways the Nixon domestic agenda was just a continuation of LBJ's Great Society.

This was partly because Congress was still in the hands of Democrats, but also Nixon didn't push for conservative programs, and he didn't veto new initiatives. Because they were popular, and he liked to be popular.

So in fact a number of big government liberal programs began under Nixon. I mean the environmental movement achieved success with the enactment of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board were created to make new regulations that would protect workers' safety and make cars safer. That's not government getting out of our lives, that's government getting into our cars. And when Nixon had the opportunity to nominate a new Chief Justice to the Supreme Court, after Earl Warren retired in 1969, his choice, Warren Burger, was supposed to be a supporter of small government and conservative ideals. But just like Nixon he proved a disappointment in that regard.

Like in Swann versus Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, the court upheld a lower court ruling that required busing of students to achieve integration in Charlotte schools. Then the Burger Court made it easier for minorities to sue for employment discrimination especially with its ruling in regents of the University of California versus Bakke. This upheld affirmative action as a valid governmental interest, although it did strike down the use of strict quotas in university admissions.

Now many conservatives didn't like these affirmative action decisions, but one case above all others had a profound effect on American politics: Roe versus Wade. Roe v. Wade established a woman's right to have an abortion in the first trimester of her pregnancy as well as a more limited right as the pregnancy progressed. And that decision galvanized first Catholics and then evangelical protestants. And that ties in nicely with another strand in American conservatism that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble: Decline in Traditional Values (8:25) =====

Many Americans felt that traditional family values were deteriorating and looked to conservative Republican candidates to stop that slide. They were particularly alarmed by the continuing success of the sexual revolution as symbolized by Roe V. Wade and the increasing availability birth control. Statistics tend to back up the claim that traditional family values were in decline in the 1970s, like the number of divorces soared to over one million in 1975, exceeding the number of first time marriages. The birth rate declined with women bearing 1.7 children during their lifetimes by 1976, less than half the figure in 1957. Now of course many people would argue that the decline in these traditional values allowed more freedom for women and for a lot of terrible marriages to end, but that's neither here nor there.

Some conservatives also complained about the passage in 1972 of Title IX which banned gender discrimination in higher education. But many more expressed concern about the increasing number of women in the work force, like by 1980 40% of women with young children had been in the workforce up from 20% in 1960. The backlash against increased opportunity for women is most obviously seen in the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1974, although it passed Congress easily 1972. Opponents of the ERA, which rather innocuously declared that equality of rights under the law could not be abridged on account of sex, argued that the ERA would let men of the hook for providing for their wives and children, and that working women would lead to the further breakdown of the family. Again, all the ERA stated was that women and men would have equal rights under the law of the United States. But anyway, some anti ERA supporters, like Phyllis Schlafly, claimed that free enterprise was the greatest liberator of women because the purchase of new labor-saving devises would offer them genuine freedom in their traditional roles in wife and mother. Essentially, the vacuum cleaner shall make you free. And those arguments were persuasive to enough people that the ERA was not ratified in the required three quarters of the United States.

Thanks Thought Bubble, sorry for letting my personal feelings get in the way of that one.

===== Watergate Scandal (10:27) =====

Anyway, Nixon didn't have much to do with the continuing sexual revolution. It would have continued without him, because you know, skoodilypooping is popular.
But he was successfully re-elected in 1972, partly because his opponent was the democratic Barry Goldwater, George McGovern. McGovern only carried one state, and it wasn't even his home state, it was Massachusetts, of course. But even though they couldn't possibly lose, Nixon's campaign decided to cheat. In June of 1972 people from Nixon's campaign broke into McGovern's campaign office, possibly to plant bugs.

Now we don't know if Nixon actually knew about the activities of the former employees of the amazingly acronymed CREEP, that is the Committee for the Re-election of the President. But this break in at the Watergate Hotel eventually led to Nixon being the first, and so far the only, American president to resign.

What we do know is this: Nixon was really paranoid about his opponents, even the ones who appealed to 12% of American voters, especially after Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon papers to the New York Times in 1971. So he drew up an enemies list and created a special investigative unit, called the Plumbers, whose job was to fix toilets. No, it was to stop leaks, that makes more sense.

I'm sorry Stan, it's just the toilets in the White House were over a hundred years old and I figures they might need some fixing, but apparently: no. Leaking.

So what ultimately doomed Nixon was not the break in itself, but the revelations that he covered it up by authorizing hush money payments keep the burglars silent, and also instructing the FBI not to investigate in the crime. In August of 1974 the House Judiciary Committee recommended that articles of impeachment be drawn up against Nixon for conspiracy and obstruction of justice. But the real crime, ultimately, was abuse of power, and there's really no question about whether he was guilty of that, so Nixon resigned.

===== Mystery Document (12:09) =====

Aw man, I was thinking I was getting away without a Mystery Document today.

The rules here are simple: I guess the author of the Mystery Document and lately I'm never wrong. All right.

> Today I am an inquisitor. I believe hyperbole would not be fictional and would not overstate the solemness that I feel right now. My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.

Aw, I'm going to get shocked today. Is it Sam Irvin? Aw, dangit! Apparently it was African American congresswoman from Texas, Barbara Jordan. Stan that is much too hard. I know you're getting tired of me not being shocked Stan, because it's pretty strange to end an episode on conservatism with a quote from Barbara Jordan, whose election to Congress has to be seen as a huge victory for liberalism.

===== Conclusion (13:04) =====

But I guess it is symbolic of the very things that many conservatives found unsettling in the 1970s, including political and economic success for African Americans and women, and a legislation that helped the marginalized. I know that sounds very judgmental, but on the other hand the federal government has become a huge part of every American's life, maybe too huge. And certainly conservatives weren't wrong, when they said that the Founding Fathers of the US would hardly recognize the nation that we had become by the 1970s.

In fact, Watergate was followed by a Senate investigation by the Church Committee, which revealed that Nixon was hardly the first president to have abused his power. The government had spied on Americans throughout the Cold War and tried to disrupt the Civil Rights movement. And the Church Commission, Watergate, the Pentagon papers, Vietnam, all of these things revealed a government that truly was out of control, and this undermined a fundamental liberal belief that government is a good institution that is supposed to solve problems and promote freedom. And for many conservatives these scandals sent a clear signal that government couldn't promote freedom and couldn't solve problems and that the liberal government of the New Deal and the Great Society had to be stopped.
Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

===== Credits (14:09) =====

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