The Clinton Years, or the 1990s: Crash Course US History #45

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course U.S. history, and today, we have finally reached the Clinton years. Bill Clinton and I are really quite similar, actually. We were both brought up in the South. We both come from broken families … well, no, not actually. Also, I did not attended any Ivy League University. Yeah, I'm actually nothing like Bill Clinton. Well, except for the Southern thing, and also both of us are married to women who are smarter than we are.

Me from the past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green? But he was *president*.

Current John: Whatever, I'm still young, Me From the Past! Clinton wasn't even governor of Arkansas until he was like (looks at computer)... oh, crap, he was 32, I'm finished!

[intro]

===== Foreign Policy (0:40) =====

So Clinton's presidency was focused on domestic policy and a sex scandal – in fact, his campaign war room famously featured a sign that read "It's the economy, stupid." His domestic legacy is pretty complex, though, so we're going to start with his foreign policy.

The Clinton years didn't feature as many major foreign policy successes as Bush 41, but Clinton did have his moments. Like his administration achieved a partial success with the 1993 Oslo Accords, when Israel recognized the legitimacy of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. However, that eventually resulted in the PLO becoming progressively less powerful and as you may have noticed, it didn't ultimately achieve peace in the Middle East.

Clinton was more successful in Yugoslavia, where he pushed NATO to actually do something for once in this case... bombing, sending troops, kinda something. Now there had been widespread ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims before the NATO intervention but the fighting ended with the Dayton Accords.

And then there's the Rwandan genocide, which the Clinton administration did absolutely nothing to prevent, and where 800,000 people died in less than a month. The Rwandan genocide is probably the international community's greatest failure in the 2nd half of the 20th century, and while certainly Clinton was among many people who were complicit to that including like, me, yeah… you know... so far, it's not such a great foreign policy record.

Terrorism also became a bigger issue during Clinton's presidency. The World Trade Center was bombed for the 1st time, the *U.S.S. Cole* was attacked, but the most destructive terrorist act during Clinton's presidency was of course committed by Americans - Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols who blew up the Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City.

===== Domestic Policy and Politics (2:07) =====

Which brings us to an awkward transition from domestic terrorism to domestic policy. So Bill Clinton was from Hope, Arkansas, and he ran as a centrist Democrat who wanted to do things differently. He wasn't going to be inside the Washington beltway. And he wasn't going to be some old-fashioned liberal who was all about raising taxes, funneling billions of dollars to Snuffleupagus.

That centrism made him very electable, but his first few domestic agenda items faltered, like he tried to end the ban on gay people entering in the military but opposition led him to compromise with the famous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. Essentially you were allowed to be homosexual, if you were in the military, you just weren't allowed to acknowledge it.

And then there was the 1993 healthcare initiative led by Clinton's wife, Hillary, which was also a failure. By the 90's, the United States was the last industrialized nation not to have universal health care and while Hillary Clinton's plan would have resulted in Americans having universal health care, it was too complicated to sell to us.

Also, it faced very powerful opposition from like drug companies, and insurers, and medical device makers… lots of people. But at least it had a working website. What's that, Stan? There was no Web? What did they use, like a mobile app or something? There was no apps? I thought we were in modern history!

So on the heels of these failed policy initiatives in 1994, Democrats were swept out of Congress and Republicans took control of both the Senate and the House. The new speaker of the House, whose real name was Newt Gingrich, and who would later run for president despite being named Newt Gingrich, issued something called the Contract with America.

It promised to cut government, cut taxes, cut regulation, overhaul welfare and end affirmative action -- and this led to a Government shutdown in 1995 over an inability to reach a budget agreement between the Congress and the president. Which in turn made all these new Congressional Republicans very unpopular with the American people as a whole and played into Clinton's political strategy of "triangulation."

His strategy was to campaign against radical Republicans while co-opting some of their ideas. The most obvious example was his declaration in January 1996 that "The era of big government is over". Spoiler alert: It wasn't. There has been no president since World War II who decreased the size of the government. And that will change when never, because all of the things that actually cost the government a lot of money, like Social Security and Medicare, are very popular and both of those programs benefit old people, who vote disproportionately because they have nothing to do since *Murder She Wrote* was cancelled.

However, Clinton did actually shrink parts of the government with policies like the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which deregulated broadcasting. But Clinton's signature economic policy was Welfare Reform – aka the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act – of 1996. This law replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, which had given money directly to poor mothers.

But with Clinton's welfare reform, states received block grants that came with strings attached, including work requirements and time limits for total benefits. Welfare rolls plummeted, and many economists see this as the rare bipartisan victory in the 1990's, but it's still controversial and many liberal people felt like Bill Clinton had betrayed them.

But Clinton still remained popular through much of his presidency, largely because it really is the economy, stupid, and the economy got better. In fact, by the time Clinton left office unemployment was below 4% which hadn't happened since the 1960s. That meant there should have been inflation, but somehow there wasn't, possibly because of increased global competition that kept wages down, and also energy prices that were remarkably low as worldwide oil production increased.

===== Technological Advancement: Mystery Document (5:38) =====

Microchips made it possible to develop loads of new products, like personal computers and DVD players, and video games, and cell phones, and Crash Course. And computers completely transformed the American workplace. I mean until the 90's, people would go to work, and they would sit in their offices at their desks, and they would… I don't know what did, because they didn't have computers! How did anything get done before computers, I mean how were books written, how was *The Godfather* edited, how was this globe made, I mean did some individual's human hand-sculpt it from clay?

So no wonder the economy got better; we'd stumbled on the biggest innovation since like wheels. And during the Clinton administration, we didn't just have computers; we had computers that began to connect to each other. I'm referring of course to the Internet, which might have remained like a military communications network if computer scientists and entrepreneurs hadn't worked out how to use it to sell things.

This was the beginning of the e-commerce boom, which would be followed by an e-commerce bust, but then another e-commerce boom, which would eventually give us websites where you can buy Crash Course DVD's, like DFTBA.com, and also lesser known e-commerce sites like EBay and Amazon.

Oh, it's time for the mystery document? The rules here are simple. I read the mystery document, I either get the author correct, or I get shocked. Okay here we go.

"The information highway will extend the electronic marketplace and make it the ultimate go-between, the universal middleman. Often the only humans involved in a transaction will be the actual buyer and the seller. All the goods for sale in the world will be available for you to examine, compare, and often customize. When you want to buy something you'll be able to tell your computer to find if for you at the best price offered by any acceptable source or ask your computer to "haggle" with the computers of various sellers. Information about vendors and their products and services will be available to any computer connected to the highway. Servers distributed worldwide will accept bids, resolve offers into completed transactions, control authentication and security, and handle all other aspects of the marketplace, including the transfer of funds. This will carry us into a new world of low-friction, low-overhead capitalism, in which market information will be plentiful and transaction costs low. It will be a shopper's heaven."

Stan, that sounds like something that Amazon founder Jeff Bezos would say. No? Dangit, Bill Gates. Let me tell you how much I enjoy this, none. Oh, the information super highway it made all of this possible including my shock pen. Ahhh!

===== Economics and Globalization (8:05) =====

Now one of the lessons of history is that good news for someone is almost always bad news for someone else and that was certainly the case with the longest period of economic expansion in American history. Increased use of Information Technology facilitated the globalization of manufacturing and the pressure to manufacture cheaply pushed wages down and encouraged companies to locate factories in countries with lower environmental regulations and also lower wages. That's great for companies, it's good for prices, arguably good for workers in the developing world, not so great for the environment or for American workers.

The deregulation of finance also contributed to global growth. Capital could flow more easily anywhere in the world, but this also meant that it could flow out easily, making financial crises more likely and more widespread. The growth of free flowing capital in the 1990's created a world in which the crash of 2008 was more or less inevitable.
But before that. we had the crash of 2000. As money flowed into the stock market, bubbles developed. And in some ways this was more problematic than it used to be, because a much greater percentage of Americans had become investors in stocks - an actual majority of them by the year 2000.

And many of these investors were buying into these hot new dot-com stocks, in fact the tech-heavy NASDAQ exchange soared in 1998 and 1999. And then it lost 80% of its value in 2000 when the bubble burst. It turns out that the Pets.com business model of selling you dog food at a loss is not a sustainable business model. Although to be fair, Amazon has been selling stuff at a loss now for 20 years and they're still at it. So… you know… maybe I'm wrong.

So during this period, real wages grew, but the gains were very unequal like when you adjust for inflation, wages of non-supervisory workers remained below what they were in the 1970s. And for the poor it was even worse. Our old friend Eric Foner reports that "Average after-tax income of the poorest 1/5 of Americans fell 12 percent, and that of the middle 1/5 decreased by 3 percent." Meanwhile, the income of the top fifth increased 38%.

Now of course, this trend towards inequality and the majority of jobs being created in low wage, insecure, service industries would continue into the 21st century. But the economic and political pictures that we've sought to paint only tell half of the story of the 1990s, because it was also a decade characterized by what has been called the Culture Wars.

===== Culture Wars: Thought Bubble (10:21) =====

A big part of this was immigration, which rose enormously after immigration reform in 1965. Between 1965 and 2000, the US saw almost 24 million immigrants arrive, compared with 27 million during the peak immigration period between 1880 and 1924. Fully half of new immigrants came from Latin America and the Caribbean, 35% came from Asia, only 10% came from Europe and most of them were from the former USSR and the Balkans.

As had always been the case, most immigrants were attracted by labor opportunities, but now more were highly educated. In fact, 40% had college educations. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Latinos were the largest immigrant group by far, with Mexicans making up the largest contingent and by 2007 Latinos would replace African Americans as the second largest ethnic group. Latinos suffered disproportionate poverty, and, despite significant economic gains during the 1990s, African Americans still found their economic opportunities limited. According to Eric Foner, "In 2007, the total assets of the median white family […] stood at $87,000. For black families, the figure was $5,400."

Diversity also increased in other ways, like single parent families became more accepted, which was essential as 50% of marriages ended in divorce. Out-of-wedlock births declined, primarily because teenagers were practicing safer sex. And teens and adults were cohabiting before or instead of marriage. Eventually the Mom, Dad, and 2.4 kids standard American household became only one of a number of accepted options for families.

Gay and trans people became increasingly visible in the national

consciousness as a result of the GLBT rights movement and it becoming safer for people to come out of the closet. On the other hand, the AIDS epidemic, which disproportionately affected the GLBT community was disastrous. By 2000, 400,000 Americans had died of AIDS.

Then there's the depressing rise in imprisonment. Politicians competed with each other to see who could be tougher on crime and as the War on Drugs continued, many state legislatures passed "three strikes" laws meaning that people who were convicted of three felonies would go to prison for life. The number of Americans in prison skyrocketed. By 2008 it was 2.3 million, ONE QUARTER of the total number of inmates on planet Earth. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Although I have to say, I thought this was going to be a happy one, I mean, the economy is growing, things are getting better for people in the GLBTQ community, and then boom, boom, boom, it's all terrible!

===== Scandal and Impeachment (12:45) =====

I don't want to underplay the many benefits of our increased prosperity and diversity but all of this multiculturalism and change made for a very tense political atmosphere. To some people, it seemed like the open free-wheeling liberalism of the 60's had run amok, and those people really started to hate the Clintons. But among Bill Clinton's many flaws - facelessness, cigar smoking - his biggest was his inability to stop cheating on his wife.

Clinton had dodged accusations of extramarital skoodilypooping while running for the presidential nomination which contributed to his unfortunate "Slick Willie" moniker. But while he was president, Clinton's former employee Paula Jones sued him for sexual harassment that had occurred, allegedly occurred – I guess it probably occurred – allegedly occurred while he was governor of Arkansas.

While gathering evidence for that lawsuit, investigators discovered that the president had carried on a sexual relationship with a young intern named Monica Lewinsky. The President denied having "sexual relations" with Monica Lewinsky which was a lie unless you are President Bill Clinton and have a very narrow definition of "sexual relations." That lie to a Justice Department official was the basis for articles of impeachment for perjury and obstruction of justice.

And so it was that the president of the United States was impeached for saying that he didn't have sex with a woman that he did have sex with, unless of course you define sex very narrowly, and it all depends on what your definition of is is, and etc. In early 1999, Clinton was acquitted of these charges in a congressional vote that went right down party lines and he served out the remainder of his term but he was significantly weakened. Also, he served out the remainder of his presidency sleeping on the couch.

===== Conclusion (14:19) =====

So the 90s were a really pivotal decade to the world we live in right now, a globalized, multicultural, Instagram-filtered world. But as we became more globally connected political divisions grew within the United States. And this became especially problematic because with the growth of the Internet it was easier than ever to only hear voices that you already know you agree with. To live inside of an echo chamber where your news doesn't necessarily resemble your neighbor's news.

In some ways Bill Clinton directed these changes, but in most ways they directed him. But that's what I find so fascinating about history, even the fancy people who get their heads on the chalkboard, even they are subject to historical forces.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

===== Credits (14:59) =====

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Thank you so much for watching Crash Course, thanks for making it possible, and as we say in my hometown, "Don't forget to be awesome."