

American History: The 1990s

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A Korean-American shopping mall burns at Third Street and Vermont Avenue in Los Angeles on April 30, 1992, the second day of rioting in the city over a police beating case



STEVE EMBER:
Welcome to THE
MAKING OF A NATION
-- American history in
VOA Special English.
I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we take a look at life in the United States during the last decade of the twentieth century.

(MUSIC)

For most of the nineteen nineties, the nation was at peace. The Soviet Union collapsed in nineteen ninety-one, bringing an end to years of costly military competition.

During the nineties the American economy recovered from a recession and grew strong. Inflation and unemployment were low. There were new developments in medicine and technology. The Internet began to evolve from a defense project mainly linking researchers into a new way for the world to communicate.

America grew by almost thirty-three million people during the nineteen nineties - the largest increase of any decade in its history. By the end of the nineties more than two hundred eighty-million people were living in the United States.

During the decade of the nineties, there was a large increase in immigration from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. For the first time in seventy years, one in ten Americans was born in another country.

At the same time, the population was getting older. That added to the nation's health care costs. America's new president, Bill Clinton, promised to reform the health care system. But in the end, like other presidents before him, Clinton failed to win support for that idea in Congress.

Divorce rates in the United States had begun to grow sharply in the nineteen seventies. By the nineties those rates were starting to drop. But there were millions of children living with only one parent, or with their grandparents. Single-parent families are more likely to be poor.

In nineteen eighty, single-parent households represented about twenty percent of all households in the United States with children. By nineteen ninety that number had reached twenty-four percent, and was continuing to rise.

(MUSIC)

In nineteen ninety-one, a black man named Rodney King led police in Los Angeles on a high-speed chase. After the chase, officers tried to arrest him.

PETER JENNINGS (ABC NEWS): "Now, the story that might never have surfaced if someone hadn't picked up his home video camera. We've all seen the pictures of Los Angeles Police officers beating a man they had just pulled over."

A man living nearby videotaped officers striking King repeatedly with their sticks and kicking him on the ground. The officers later said King had resisted even after they shocked him with an electric stun gun. The man took the eighty-one-second video to a local television station. Soon people all over the country were watching it.

The beating led to criminal charges against four white police officers. The trial was moved out of Los Angeles. Their lawyers argued that the officers might not receive a fair trial there.

On April twenty-ninth, nineteen ninety-two, a mostly white jury in a community north of the city returned its findings. The jury found the officers not guilty of assaulting Rodney King.

(MUSIC)

Anger at the jury's verdict soon led to rioting that began in the largely poor black neighborhoods of south-central Los Angeles.

ANNOUNCER: "Don't go near this area -- South Central Los Angeles at Florence and Normandy, because there is still no police presence there, and a lot of people trying to get through that intersection have been assaulted with rocks and bottles and sticks."

More than fifty people died in days of violence before police and troops brought the unrest under control. Many more were injured and hundreds of buildings were destroyed by fire. It was some of the worst rioting in American history and received worldwide attention.

The following year, a federal jury found two of the officers who had beaten Rodney King guilty of violating his civil rights. They were sent to prison.

(MUSIC)

Another case in Los Angeles that received international attention also involved a racial element.

O.J. Simpson, a black former football star and actor, was charged with murdering his white former wife and a male friend of hers. They were stabbed to death in nineteen ninety-four.

Many legal experts believed the case against Simpson was strong. So did many more whites than blacks in public opinion surveys.

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Defense lawyer Johnnie Cochran put on a pair of gloves to demonstrate a point to the jury in the O.J. Simpson murder trial in 1995. A bloody glove had been found at the murder scene, and another outside Simpson's house.

JOHNNIE COCHRAN: "The day Mr. Darden asked Mr. Simpson to try on those gloves, and the gloves didn't fit. Remember these words: If it doesn't fit, you must acquit."

Simpson's lead defense attorney, Johnnie Cochran.

DEIRDRE ROBINSON (JUDGE'S CLERK): "We, the jury, in the above-entitled action, find the defendant Orenthal James Simpson not guilty of the crime of murder."



A mostly black jury found Simpson not guilty. But later, in a civil case brought by the victims' families, a mostly white jury found him responsible for the killings and ordered him to pay damages.

(MUSIC)

In nineteen ninety, researchers launched the Human Genome Project. This was a government-supported effort to identify and map all of the genes in the body. The Human Genome Project raised hopes for new medical treatments and cures for diseases.

The project lasted thirteen years, until two thousand three. In two thousand, President Clinton announced the completion of a "working draft" of the genome.

BILL CLINTON: "It will revolutionize the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of most, if not all, human diseases. In coming years, doctors increasingly will be able to cure diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes and cancer."

(MUSIC)



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A family surfing the Internet in 1995

During the nineteen nineties, personal computers became more and more a part of everyday life. And more and more people were going online over a network linking computers around the world. The Internet would grow into an easy way to send e-mail, find information and buy products over the World Wide Web.

In music, many Americans in the early nineties were listening to a new sound from the Pacific Northwest. It became known as grunge rock.

(MUSIC)

The capital for grunge bands was Seattle, in Washington state.

One of the best known bands was Nirvana. Their nineteen ninety-one album "Nevermind" contained some of their most successful songs, including "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

Kurt Cobain helped define the grunge sound. He was Nirvana's lead singer, guitar player and songwriter. But in April nineteen ninety-four that voice was silenced.

Officials said he killed himself with a shotgun. Kurt Cobain was twenty-seven years old, the husband of singer Courtney Love, and one of the most influential musicians of his day.

(MUSIC)

On television, millions of people watched shows like "ER" a drama series about a busy hospital emergency room. Many fans tuned in to watch George Clooney play a young doctor on the show.

DOUG ROSS (GEORGE CLOONEY): "What's going on?"

MARK GREENE (ANTHONY EDWARDS): "Mr. Abbott asked us to try to resuscitate his son."

DOUG ROSS: "He shouldn't have made it through the night."

MR. ABBOTT: "Who the hell are you?"

DOUG ROSS: "I'm Dr. Ross. Look, he was in my care."

"E-R" first went on the air in nineteen ninety-four and lasted fifteen years.

(MUSIC)

"Law & Order" was a crime drama, but it took a different path, involving the interactions of police, lawyers and judges.

The popularity of the series set in New York led to several related "Law and Order" spinoff series.

(MUSIC)

For laughs, millions of people watched shows like "Seinfeld" and "Friends."

The "Friends" were Ross, Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Joey and Chandler, six young New Yorkers.

(MUSIC)



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Jerry Seinfeld, left, Julia Louise-Dreyfus and Jason Alexander at the Emmy Awards in 1993

"Seinfeld" was also set in, you guessed it, New York. It starred comedian Jerry Seinfeld playing himself. The series was hugely popular and won many awards. TV Guide magazine put it at the top of its two thousand two list of the "50 Greatest Shows of All Time."

JERRY: "I'm sorry. Excuse me one second. [Picks up phone] Hello?"

TELEMARKETER: "Hello, would you be interested in switching over to TMI long-distance service?"

JERRY: "Oh, gee, I can't talk right now. Why don't you give me your home number and I'll call you later."

TELEMARKETER: "Uh, I'm sorry, we're not allowed to do that."

JERRY: "Oh, I guess you don't want people calling you at home."

TELEMARKETER: "Uh, no."

JERRY: "Well, now you know how I feel. [Laughter]"

"Seinfeld" was, in the words of its creator, a "show about nothing." But Jerry and his friends Elaine, George and Kramer managed to find plenty of humor in life's everyday problems and situations.

(MUSIC)

Another popular show in the nineties was the animated series "The Simpsons," which like "Seinfeld" premiered in nineteen eighty-nine. New episodes of "The Simpsons" -- Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie -- continued into the twenty-first century.

(MUSIC)

ELDERLY SURVIVOR: "Titanic was called the ship of dreams. And it was; it really was."

JACK DAWSON (LEONADO DiCAPRIO): "All right, open your eyes."

The nineteen ninety-seven film "Titanic" became the first movie to reach one billion dollars in ticket sales at theaters worldwide.

JACK DAWSON: "You never know what hand you're going to get dealt next. You learn to take life as it comes at you."

ROSE BUKATER (KATE WINSLET): "When the ship docks, I'm getting off with you."

Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet played young lovers on the famous ship that sank in April nineteen twelve, after hitting an iceberg in the North Atlantic.

(MUSIC)

ALAN GRANT (SAM NEILL): "How fast are they?"

JOHN HAMMOND (RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH): "Well, we clocked the T-Rex at thirty-two miles an hour."

ELLIE SATTLER (LAURA DERN): "You said you've got a T-Rex?"

JOHN HAMMOND: "Uh-huh."

ALAN GRANT: "Say again?"

JOHN HAMMOND: "We have a T-Rex. Dr. Grant, my dear Dr. Sattler, Welcome ... to Jurassic Park."

Another popular film was "Jurassic Park," released in nineteen ninety-three. In it, dinosaurs from prehistoric times are brought back to life, with disastrous results.

SOUND: "We're gonna make a fortune with this place."

In sports, baseball players went on strike in nineteen ninety-four. The World Series championship was cancelled that year.

(SOUND)

In basketball, millions of fans were watching Michael Jordan lead the Chicago Bulls to championships.

(MUSIC)

As the nineties came to a close, people around the world were preparing to celebrate the arrival of the year two thousand. It was a big event. But there were also concerns about the "millennium bug" or "Y2K" issue.

This was the worry that older computers might not be able to recognize the calendar change. Lots of activity went into making sure things would go smoothly after midnight on December thirty-first, nineteen ninety-nine.

(MUSIC)

In two thousand, Americans elected the first president to lead the nation in the new millennium. But the election of George W. Bush resulted in a dispute that divided the nation. That will be our story next week.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.

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