**Chapter 29: The Search for Order in an Era of Limits, 1973-1980**

**[[BIG IDEA:** How did the legacy of social changes—such as shifting gender roles, civil rights, and challenges to the family—in the 1960s continue to reverberate in the 1970s, leading to both new opportunities and political disagreement?]]

The 1960s were a dramatic and pivotal decade, but the protests and social unrest of those years might incline us to overlook the period immediately afterward. Yet many historians now see the 1970s as a decade of even more pivotal change. This is true for two reasons, both of which we explain in detail in Chapter 29.

First, the dramatic, sustained economic growth that the United States had experienced since the end of World War II came to a halt. The years of the 1970s were characterized by high inflation and economic stagnation. As the prices of ordinary goods soared for average consumers, households cut back and more and more women entered the paid workforce, to make up the difference.

At the same time, American industry began to suffer, as competition from abroad threatened once dominant national industries, such as automobile and steel. An “era of limits” had been reached, as one politician put it. No public officials, including all three presidents who served in the decade, were able to reverse the downward economic spiral.

The second reason accounting for the importance of the brief period between 1973 and 1980 is rapid social change. The years of the late 1960s had been tumultuous, but the evidence of changing society did not become fully evident until later years. In the 1970s, the women’s movement reached its historical peak, as did the gay rights movement. The environmental movement emerged and pointed to the natural limits of America’s consumer society. New battles over civil rights, this time over affirmative action and school bussing, revealed a society still grappling with questions of racial justice.

On top of all this, many came to believe that the American family was in crisis. The divorce rate, after holding steady for much of the postwar period, began to climb. More than at any time since the 1930s, Americans saw their society as fragile, their hold on an orderly and predictable life not as secure as it once seemed.

This made for a convulsive period of disillusionment and experimentation, what we’ve called “a search for order in an era of limits.”