Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1931, shortly before he became President of the United States. He was elected in 1932 and served until his death in 1945, the longest tenure of any American chief executive. Courtesy of Library of Congress.
In 1900 and for three decades thereafter, the federal government was a remote presence in the lives of most Americans, except during wartime. In peacetime, their primary contact with the federal government occurred at the post office.

Federal spending first peaked during World War I. Between 1930 and 1940, annual federal expenditures more than doubled. During World War II they quadrupled, reaching 44 percent of the Gross Domestic Product by the end of the war. Federal expenditures plummeted after the war, but not to prewar levels. During the last four decades of the century, federal expenditures held at about 20 percent of GDP.

A great expansion in federal activity occurred in the first Roosevelt administration (1933–1937) with the creation of the Social Security retirement system, unemployment insurance, government guarantees of bank deposits and home mortgages, income support for families with dependent children, low-rent public housing, direct subsidies to farmers, work relief projects, and regional development programs. Another wave of expansion occurred during the Johnson and Nixon administrations (1963–1974) with the introduction of Medicare and Medicaid, and the growing involvement of the federal government in education, urban development, environmental protection, occupational safety, emergency food distribution, and dozens of other functions.

More than 60,000 state and local governments have taxing power in the United States: fifty states, about 3,000 counties, 20,000 municipalities, 17,000 townships, 14,000 independent school districts, and more than 10,000 special districts. Before World War II, state and local governments combined spent a good deal more than the federal government during peacetime. From 1942 through the last decade of the century, however, Washington’s annual expenditures exceeded those of all state and local governments.
Federal government employees were a smaller component of the labor force at the end of the century than at any time since 1940.

As the chart indicates, in 1997, state and local governments employed six times more people than the federal government. This may seem counterintuitive, given the fact that all state and local governments combined spend somewhat less each year than the federal government.

These employment trends can be easily explained, however. First, the federal government makes much greater use of contractors to perform governmental functions than do state and local governments. Federal agencies routinely outsource research and development, strategic planning, employee training and evaluation, computer installation, system and standards design, transportation, printing and even some national security and intelligence operations. Second, more than half of the federal budget consists of payments to, or on behalf of, individual beneficiaries—Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, welfare, veterans’ benefits, civil service and military retirement, housing subsidies, student aid, and so forth. Other substantial chunks go to the armed services, debt service, and grants to the states, leaving only about a fifth of the federal budget for the civilian payroll. The principal reductions of federal employees in the last decade of the century were among civilians working at the Department of Defense.
In 1900, the only people receiving direct payments from Washington were war veterans and their dependents. In any given year at the end of the century, the majority of American families received direct benefits from the U.S. Treasury under one or more entitlement programs.

Entitlements are automatic government payments to, or on behalf of, individuals or organizations that fall into some category defined by law, such as all college students or all homeowners in disaster-stricken counties. The largest entitlement is Social Security—more precisely, Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance—the system of federal pensions for retired workers and their dependents, disabled workers and their dependents, and survivors of deceased workers. The next largest is Medicare, which pays some, but not all, of the medical and hospital expenses of people over age sixty-five, followed by Medicaid, a system of health insurance for low-income and needy people. The chart shows only the federal contribution to Medicaid; the cost of this expensive and rapidly growing program is shared by the states.

The other programs shown on the chart are less costly. Veterans' benefits actually declined after 1975. Direct subsidies to the poor—welfare grants and food stamps—increased, but their combined cost remained far less than the cost of Medicaid.

The chart shows only the largest and most conspicuous of the federal entitlements. It does not include dozens of others, including the military and civil service retirement systems, unemployment insurance, income programs for the blind and disabled, school breakfasts and lunches, housing subsidies, child care support, nutrition for the elderly, vocational training, disaster relief, flood insurance, farm subsidies, and various special benefits for handicapped persons, American Indians, pregnant women, displaced defense workers, tobacco farmers, and graduate students.
Growth of Federal Entitlements
Billions of 1999 dollars

Veterans’ benefits
Social Security
Medicare
Medicaid
AFDC (TANF) and Food Stamps

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In the last three decades of the century, the judicial branch of the federal government grew at a much faster rate than the executive and legislative branches.

From 1970 to 1998, the number of federal employees in the judicial branch quadrupled from 6,887 to 31,742 (see upper chart). In the same period, the number of federal employees in the legislative branch remained almost exactly the same: 30,715 in 1970 and 30,747 in 1998. The number of employees in the much larger executive branch actually declined slightly from 2.8 million to 2.7 million, including postal workers.

The growth of the judicial branch followed a sharp increase in the number of civil cases commenced in federal district courts after 1960 (see lower chart). In the 1940s, about half of all new cases were criminal cases, but the proportion of criminal cases declined to less than a fifth by the end of the century. The largest categories of civil cases were prisoner petitions, civil rights complaints, and product liability claims—all of which were rare or nonexistent in the federal courts before the 1960s. In one three-year period alone, 1993 to 1996, prisoner petitions increased by 32 percent, civil rights complaints by 53 percent, and product liability claims by 82 percent.

Despite the rapid expansion of judicial branch personnel, the district courts would have collapsed under this tidal wave of litigation if the proportion of cases going to trial had remained about the same. The fact is that fewer cases went to trial at the end of the century than in 1970. In 1997, only 3 percent of cases went to trial, usually a bench trial without a jury. Most cases were withdrawn by the plaintiffs, dismissed by the court, or settled at an early stage of the proceedings. Indeed, many were filed in the expectation of a quick cash settlement.
Thousands of employees

Thousands of cases commenced each year

Federal Judiciary
Thousands of employees

1901 = 3,000
1900 1920 1940 1960 1980 2000
1998 = 32,000

Government

1997 = 265,000
1940 = 39,000
1900 1920 1940 1960 1980 2000
1901 = 3,000

1998 = 32,000
U.S. armed forces expanded rapidly for each major conflict during the century. During the Cold War, the nation maintained a large permanent force for the first time in its history.

The Founding Fathers regarded standing armies as inimical to constitutional government. Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the United States had a much smaller military establishment in peacetime than any other great power and made no peacetime use of conscription.

With the outbreak of each war, the armed forces were expanded with extraordinary speed, from 179,000 active personnel in 1916 to almost 3 million in 1918, and from less than half a million in 1940 to more than 12 million in 1945. The contraction in the number of personnel was equally rapid. The number of military personnel on active duty declined by 88 percent between 1918 and 1920, and by exactly the same percentage between 1945 and 1948.

The Cold War, which was neither war nor peace, altered this pattern. From 1948 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the armed services remained at historically high numbers, peaking at 3.6 million during the Korean War and 3.5 million during the Vietnam War. After 1987, the size of the armed forces declined slowly from year to year.

The conversion to an all-volunteer force in 1972 and the subsequent increase in military pay to the level of market wages had dramatic effects on the military community. At the end of the century, enlisted soldiers and sailors were older, better educated, and more highly trained than their predecessors. The majority were married and lived with their spouses when serving at domestic stations. The harsher forms of military discipline were largely replaced by job incentives. Courts-martial were rare by the end of the century; the usual penalty for a serious military offense was dismissal from the service.
The armed services, rigidly segregated by race during the first part of the century, became a model of successful integration.

Black soldiers enlisted in every American war prior to World War II, beginning with the American Revolution, but they were always placed in segregated units under the command of white officers, commonly assigned to manual labor, and usually discharged when the war ended. Nearly 400,000 black enlisted men and a few black officers served in World War I, mostly in noncombat assignments.

The Selective Service Act of 1940 allowed qualified persons to volunteer or be drafted regardless of race or color. Black soldiers soon made up 11 percent of the Army’s strength. They were all placed in segregated units, and with a few important exceptions, segregation remained in full effect throughout World War II. The Army adopted full integration as a planning goal in 1951 and was able to announce in 1954 that its last segregated unit had been abolished. Many issues, such as segregation in officers clubs and military cemeteries, remained to be worked out, but after the Army became an all-volunteer force in 1972, it came as close to being color-blind as any segment of American society. By 1996, blacks made up a proportionate share of the Army’s officers (12 percent) and 30 percent of the Army’s enlisted strength.

In 1900, blacks could serve only as stewards or stokers in the Navy. The Navy entered World War II with about 4,000 black enlisted men and no black officers. All but six of the enlisted men were on mess duty. By 1943, their numbers had risen to 27,000. Two-thirds of them were still assigned to the stewards’ branch. The war was nearly over when the Navy conducted some experiments with mixed ships’ crews, but in February 1946, the Navy announced, “Effective immediately, all restrictions governing types of assignments for which Negro naval personnel are eligible are hereby lifted.”

The Marine Corps had been an all-white organization since 1798. Forced to accept black draftees during World War II, the Corps adopted a policy of rigid segregation that continued until the Korean War, when the exigencies of battle led to rapid integration.

When the Air Force became a separate branch of the armed forces in 1947, it shared the Army’s tradition of segregated units, enlistment quotas, and the axiomatic beliefs that white soldiers would not take orders from black officers or live peaceably in mixed units. But by 1949, the Air Force was officially and effectively integrated.
Blacks in the Armed Services
Percentage of officers and enlisted personnel in each service

U.S. Army
U.S. Navy
U.S. Marine Corps
U.S. Air Force

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The proportion of women in the armed forces rose rapidly in the last third of the century.

In the Civil War, as in earlier wars, a few women disguised themselves as men and joined combat units; soldiers’ wives and other women accompanied campaigning armies, and many women on both sides nursed the wounded. But military rank and status continued to be male prerogatives. The Army Nurse Corps, founded in 1901, was the first official female military organization, but its members were technically civilians.

In World War I, the Navy and the Marine Corps authorized female enlistments for yeoman, radio operator, and other support positions, and more than 10,000 Army nurses served overseas. In 1920, in recognition of their wartime services, the nurses were granted “relative rank,” from second lieutenant through major, and were permitted to wear military uniforms and insignia.

The Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps was established in 1942 as a quasi-military organization, without formal enlistment or military benefits. But a year later, it was incorporated into the Army as the Women’s Army Corps. The Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard soon followed suit. By 1945, 265,000 women were in uniform, all of them volunteers.

The separate status of women in the armed forces continued until the early 1970s, when the anticipated passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and a series of federal court decisions on gender discrimination persuaded the armed services to abolish their female branches by separate and piecemeal measures. Women were put on the same footing as men with respect to training, rank, pay, and promotion. As the chart indicates, between 1975 and 1998, the female share of officers and enlisted personnel tripled to about 14 percent of the armed services. By the end of the century, women were allowed to serve in some front-line positions and on combat ships. As integration proceeded, little notice was taken when women sometimes commanded men in U.S. military operations.
Women in the Armed Forces
Percentage of officers and enlisted personnel

1998 = 14.1%
1998 = 13.9%
1900 = 0%
1900 = 0%
1900 = 0%
In the five major conflicts in which the United States engaged during the century, American losses were highest in World War II.

A total of 440,000 U.S. military personnel were killed in action in the wars of the twentieth century, two-thirds of them during World War II. The battle death rate ranged from 3.1 percent of the Marines in World War I to 0.006 percent of naval personnel in the Persian Gulf War. In all five conflicts—World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the Persian Gulf War—Marines and Army ground units bore the brunt of the losses. But none of the services approached the 6.1 percent rate of battle deaths recorded by the Union forces in the Civil War.

These tragic losses were much lighter in number than those borne by our allies and adversaries. Worldwide, more than 100 million soldiers and civilians were killed in the wars of the twentieth century. Besides the human costs, most of the nations involved in these wars suffered vast physical destruction. Because of its geographic location, the United States was exempt from the civilian casualties, property damage, and most of the domestic disruption suffered by other nations.

Aside from the risks of combat, wartime military service became progressively less hazardous during the century. In every war the United States fought before this century, deaths of military personnel from disease and accidents greatly outnumbered battle deaths. As late as World War I, nonbattle deaths were somewhat more numerous than battle deaths, but thereafter the balance shifted. In the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, for example, battle deaths outnumbered nonbattle deaths by almost 5 to 1.

Battle death rates declined because of America’s increasing technological advantage in military equipment and improved treatment of battle wounds. U.S. weapons, vehicles, and defensive measures were superior to those of most of its adversaries. American casualties were quickly evacuated to hospitals, saving thousands of lives.
World War I, 1917–1918
World War II, 1941–1945
Korean War, 1950–1953
Vietnam War, 1964–1973
Persian Gulf War, 1991

War Deaths of Armed Forces Personnel
Thousands

Battle deaths
Other deaths

Battle deaths
Other deaths

World War I, 1917–1918
World War II, 1941–1945
Korean War, 1950–1953
Vietnam War, 1964–1973
Persian Gulf War, 1991

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By 1900, most of the Union veterans of the Civil War were dead. The government did not count Confederate veterans, but most of them were deceased as well. The forces engaged in the Spanish-American War were quite small. By 1910, only one of twenty-five American men had seen military service, the lowest proportion since the founding of the Republic.

That changed in 1917. Five million men served in World War I. In the course of World War II, more than 16 million men, mostly young, were inducted into the armed forces. Five million men served during the Korean War. By 1960, 40 percent of American men over age eighteen—and a much higher proportion of those in their thirties and forties—had served in the military. As World War I veterans died, Vietnam veterans took their place. Almost 9 million Americans served in the armed forces during the Vietnam era.

The median age of veterans oscillated with the incidence of war and passage of time. It declined from sixty-seven years in 1910 to twenty-seven years in 1920 and then rose from thirty-two years in 1950 to sixty-one years in 1998. In the last decade of the century, many World War II veterans reached their eighties, and the veteran population diminished from year to year.

Generous veterans’ benefits had important consequences. Employers in both the public and private sectors gave hiring preferences to veterans, which helped to maintain support for the armed forces throughout the long Cold War. The G.I. Bill sent millions of men back to school for advanced education and permanently enlarged American colleges and universities. Mortgages guaranteed by the Veterans Administration made home ownership possible for families with relatively low incomes and strongly encouraged suburban growth.
The patriotic attitudes of Middletown adolescents declined between 1924 and 1999, especially among females. The charts show male and female responses to four items from the 1924 Middletown High School Survey. The statements were repeated in the 1977 and 1999 replications of that survey.

Students were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

“The United States is unquestionably the best country in the world.”

“The United States was entirely right and England was entirely wrong in the American Revolution.”

“A pacifist or a conscientious objector in wartime is a ‘slacker’ who doesn’t do his share and should be prosecuted by the government.”

“Every good citizen should act according to the following statement: ‘My country—right or wrong!’”

In 1924, more than nine of ten students agreed that the United States was the best country in the world; in 1977, more than seven of ten agreed; and in 1999, about six of ten. The proportions favoring the slogan “My country—right or wrong” declined in each survey, as did the percentage in favor of prosecuting conscientious objectors in wartime. The overall trend in responses to the statement about the American Revolution was inconclusive.

The differences in the responses of male and female students changed markedly over time. In 1924, girls were more strongly patriotic than boys on all four items. In 1977, boys were more patriotic than girls, and by 1999 the difference between them had widened further. In 1999, for example, only 51 percent of girls, compared with 68 percent of boys, agreed that the United States was the best country in the world. The most extreme change in the difference between male and female attitudes concerned the statement about the American Revolution. In 1924, the proportion of girls who believed the United States was entirely right in that conflict was 10 percentage points higher than that of boys; in 1999, it was 17 percentage points lower.
Patriotic Attitudes of Middletown Adolescents
Percentage agreeing with each statement

My country—right or wrong

Conscientious objectors should be prosecuted

England was entirely wrong in the American Revolution

The U.S. is unquestionably the best country in the world

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