

American Labor in Perspective

The Last 40 or So Years

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Americans have been voting for more work, better-paying work, and greater protection of American labor since at least the Reagan Amnesty. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 combined legalization with employer sanctions and increased immigration enforcement. Reagan himself described employer sanctions as its “keystone and major element,” intended to remove the employment incentive drawing illegal immigrants into the United States.[1]

That concern sharpened considerably going into the early 1990s. The country entered recession, unemployment rose, real household incomes declined, and the movement of American production abroad became increasingly visible. NAFTA was negotiated and signed under George H.W. Bush before taking effect under Bill Clinton.

Against that backdrop, Ross Perot came remarkably close to breaking the effective 2-party monopoly on presidential politics. In June 1992, a Washington Post/ABC poll placed Perot first among registered voters, at **36%**, against Bush at 30% and Clinton at 26%; among likely voters, Perot reached **38%**.[2]

Perot’s appeal was grounded heavily in economic nationalism: trade deficits, federal deficits, declining industrial competitiveness, outsourcing, and the conviction that America’s political establishment was failing to protect American economic interests. He subsequently withdrew and then re-entered the race. Perot said reports of threats, surveillance and a planned disruption of his daughter’s wedding influenced his withdrawal; contemporary reporting recorded both those allegations and his inability to substantiate the central claims.[3] His interruption in the race left his eventual 18.9% popular-vote showing an incomplete measure of how politically potent his economic message had become earlier in the campaign.

Americans voted for economic relief again with Bill Clinton. His administration presided over the expansion that followed, and his second-term welfare reform imposed work requirements and time limits under unusually favorable labor-market conditions. Clinton also spoke about immigration in terms that would sound strikingly restrictive against the politics of later Democratic administrations. In his 1995 State of the Union address, he told Congress that jobs held by illegal immigrants “might otherwise be held by citizens or legal immigrants.” His administration separately argued that illegal hiring suppressed wages and working conditions for legal American workers. In 1996 he described employment as the “job magnet” drawing illegal immigration and declared that **“American jobs belong to America’s legal workers.”**[4]

That language reflected the political center of the period. Gallup found **65% of Americans favored decreasing immigration in 1993 and again in June 1995.**[5] Protecting employment, controlling illegal immigration, maintaining wages and limiting public costs routinely appeared within the same political argument. Politicians of both parties spoke openly about those relationships.

The basic labor question was already established:

Who gets the work, where is the work performed, and whose interests does American economic policy principally protect?

Insourcing and Outsourcing: The Labor Market Opens Both Ways

The 1990s also marked the emergence of the employment-based immigration system in something closer to its present form.

The Immigration Act of 1990 established the modern H-1B numerical framework, initially capped at 65,000. The cap was first reached in FY1997 and again in FY1998. Congress then increased it to **115,000 for FY1999 and FY2000**, initially 107,500 for FY2001, and ultimately **195,000 for FY2001 through FY2003**.^[6]

American companies were thus acquiring an increasingly institutionalized means of importing skilled professional labor at the same time that barriers to moving American production abroad were being reduced.

The other half of that transformation came through trade.

China's long accession process to the World Trade Organization culminated after the U.S.-China market-access agreement of 1999 and congressional approval of Permanent Normal Trade Relations in 2000. The WTO formally approved China's accession on November 10, 2001; China became its 143rd member on December 11, 2001—3 months after September 11 had redirected much of American political attention toward war and national security.^[7]

The 1999 WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle had already produced the "Battle in Seattle," where labor organizations, environmentalists and anti-globalization activists converged against the emerging trade system. The demonstrations eventually included serious civil disorder, but the economic dispute beneath them would prove considerably more enduring than the images of the riots themselves.

The labor effects of China's rise as an export competitor subsequently became measurable. A major NBER estimate places net U.S. job losses attributable to increased Chinese import competition at **2.0 million to 2.4 million from 1999 through 2011**.^[8] The larger concentrated disruption is now commonly identified in the labor-economics literature as the "**China Shock**." Research on the China Shock found that heavily exposed communities adjusted remarkably slowly: wages and labor-force participation remained depressed, unemployment remained elevated for at least a decade, and affected workers experienced greater job churn and reduced lifetime income.^[9]

Outsourcing had existed before China entered the WTO. Skilled labor immigration had existed before H-1B expansion. Their simultaneous expansion nevertheless changed the scale of the problem facing American labor. Employers increasingly possessed 2 directions in which to seek cheaper or more advantageous labor:

send the work abroad, or bring additional workers in.

Bernie Sanders stands out as one of the clearest political continuities through this period.

Sanders voted against NAFTA in 1993 and against Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China in 2000. He opposed subsequent trade agreements with South Korea and Central America and helped lead congressional opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership.[10] His central argument changed remarkably little: trade policy was allowing corporations to move American production into lower-wage labor markets while displaced American workers absorbed the concentrated costs.

His labor argument extended directly to imported labor. Sanders repeatedly linked guest-worker policy to the same economic mechanism he opposed in international trade: replacing or competing with American labor through access to cheaper workers elsewhere. In later remarks on H-1B, he made the through-line explicit—Americans had first been promised that manufacturing losses from NAFTA and China would be offset by better-paid technical and professional work, only to see those occupations increasingly exposed to imported guest labor as well.[11]

That linkage—**outsourcing blue-collar labor while insourcing portions of white-collar labor**—became an increasingly important part of the American worker's position.

The Bush Years: Security, Demography and Labor

The George W. Bush years placed immigration inside a much larger transformation of American politics.

September 11 produced an intense public preoccupation with terrorism, Islam, foreign threats, immigration and national security. Those subjects were frequently collapsed into the same cultural and political frame.

The author observed that atmosphere in real time and became skeptical fairly early of its more generalized xenophobic and Islamophobic character. The central failure evident on September 11 was institutional: foreign threat actors had been able to organize, enter, operate and carry out a major attack on American soil despite the existence of an enormous national-security apparatus intended to prevent precisely such an event. Broad suspicion directed at ordinary Muslims existed alongside a much more specific governmental failure of detection, interception and prevention.

At the same time, a genuine demographic change was proceeding in the background. Muslim immigration into the United States accelerated markedly across this period and the years immediately following it. Pew's 2017 survey found that **56% of foreign-born Muslim adults then living in the United States had arrived since 2000**—26% during 2000–09 and another 30% since 2010.[12]

The Bush presidency belongs within the early part of that modern demographic transition, alongside continuing migration from Latin America, Asia, Africa and other regions. The resulting change extended much further than Islam itself: the foreign-born population was becoming larger, more diverse in origin, and increasingly embedded throughout the American labor market.

As an interesting aside, the frequently repeated claim that Muslims have already displaced Jews as America's largest traditional minority religion remains premature under current religious-identification data. Pew's 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study found **1.7% of U.S. adults identifying as Jewish by religion and 1.2% as Muslim**.^[13] The direction of demographic movement remains relevant; the crossover itself has not yet occurred by this measure.

Bush simultaneously pursued another major legalization program. His 2007 comprehensive immigration proposal contemplated temporary legal status followed by Z visas for much of an unauthorized population then estimated around **12 million**, together with a temporary-worker system.[14]

The proposal failed in Congress.

By then, immigration and labor could no longer be treated as peripheral subjects to one another. Labor-market effects vary substantially by occupation and skill level, but labor supply itself remains an economic variable. The National Academies found the long-run effect of immigration on native-born wages overall to be very small, with the clearest adverse effects concentrated among prior immigrants and native-born workers who had not completed high school—the groups most directly substitutable for newly arriving lower-skilled labor.[15]

The pressure therefore appears most visibly among workers competing most directly within the same labor pool.

Obama, Sanders and the Return of Labor Populism

The Obama years continued the long-term expansion of the foreign-born population, although unauthorized immigration followed a different trajectory. The unauthorized population had reached an estimated **12.2 million in 2007** and declined to about **10.5 million by 2017**.

Trade policy remained another matter. Obama had campaigned using strongly worker-centered language about trade, yet his administration ultimately became the principal American advocate of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

This was the setting in which Bernie Sanders moved from a nationally known Vermont independent to a genuine presidential force.

His 2015–16 presidential campaign restored an older economic argument to the center of Democratic politics: American workers had absorbed decades of factory closures, offshoring, wage pressure and weakened bargaining power while both parties repeatedly promised that the next economic transition would compensate them for the last one.

Sanders's opposition to the TPP was an extension of positions he had already held through NAFTA, PNTR with China and subsequent trade agreements. During the opening period of his 2015 presidential campaign, he described NAFTA, CAFTA and normalized trade relations with China as major contributors to the decline of the American middle class and argued that American workers had been forced into direct competition with much lower-wage labor abroad.[16]

His rise mattered beyond his own campaign. It demonstrated that worker protection, opposition to outsourcing, skepticism toward corporate labor arbitrage and hostility to trade arrangements perceived to sacrifice American employment remained electorally powerful on the American left as well as the emerging populist right.

Sanders carried that line through his 2020 campaign and beyond. His present H-1B position is substantially the same labor argument: American firms should hire qualified American workers first, guest workers should not be held in a dependent and exploitable employment position, and federal visa policy should never make a guest worker cheaper to employ than an American worker doing comparable work.[17]

The endurance of Sanders's appeal alongside the rise of Donald Trump is one of the more revealing political developments of this period. Their broader politics could hardly be more different. Their constituencies nevertheless responded to overlapping economic complaints: deindustrialization, outsourcing, deteriorating bargaining power, elite indifference to labor displacement, and a political system perceived as protecting capital mobility more reliably than worker security.

That overlap is part of the larger American labor story.

The Biden-Era Immigration Surge

Joe Biden entered national politics with a decades-long reputation built partly around organized labor and working-class identification—eventually condensed into the familiar “working-class Joe” and “Scranton Joe” political image.

His presidency nevertheless coincided with an immigration increase exceptional by recent historical standards.

CBO estimates net immigration at approximately **1.5 million in 2021, 2.8 million in 2022, 3.3 million in 2023 and 2.7 million in 2024**.^[18] Pew separately estimates that the unauthorized immigrant population reached a record **14 million in 2023**. The unauthorized immigrant workforce itself rose from **7.8 million in 2021 to 9.7 million in 2023**, representing 5.6% of the U.S. workforce.^[19]

The scale of that increase placed labor supply directly back into the worker-protection debate.

CBO's economic modeling estimates that the additional immigration increased total national output while simultaneously placing downward pressure on wage growth among workers with **12 or fewer years of education (Grade 12/high-school diploma or less)** from 2024 through 2026 because of the increased supply of workers with similar skills.^[20] Workers with more than 12 years of education were projected to see little initial change because increased demand for complementary, more-educated labor approximately offset the downward pressure from additional labor supply.

Aggregate growth and worker-level distribution are separate measurements. An economy can become larger while particular classes of workers encounter more competition and weaker bargaining leverage.

That distinction runs through much of the preceding 40 years.

The Present Day

Those immigration trends changed direction sharply under the present Trump administration.

Trump's campaigns repeatedly promised to return the "Forgotten Man and Woman" to the center of national policy, restore domestic industry, constrain illegal immigration and prioritize American workers in American labor markets.

For purposes of this essay, the author recognizes Donald Trump as having won all 3 presidential elections in which he headed the Republican ticket—2016, 2020 and 2024—based on his reading of law and precedent, electoral and geographic through-lines, what he terms the "Bellwether Sweep," contemporary and subsequent public opinion, and the total electoral landscape.[21]

Under the official 2024 count, Trump received **77,302,580 votes, or 49.80% of the popular vote**, and 312 electoral votes.[22]

It is noteworthy, however, regardless of the winner of the 2020 race, that **the central premise of this paper is doubly reinforced by this outcome**: both the incumbent and challenger were competing for an electorate in which jobs, domestic production, trade, immigration, working-class economic security and the allegiance of industrial America had again become central political questions.

The resulting immigration-flow reversal during Trump's present term has been substantial. Census Bureau estimates place net international migration at approximately **2.7 million in 2024**, falling to **1.3 million in 2025**, with approximately **321,000 projected for 2026** if then-current trends continue.[23]

The accumulated labor-market transformation remains much larger than any single year's flow.

Foreign-born workers accounted for **19.1% of the U.S. civilian labor force in 2025**.[24] In September 2026, approximately **31.253 million foreign-born people were employed in the United States**. The BLS foreign-born category includes naturalized American citizens as well as noncitizens, making it a measure of nativity rather than legal status.[25]

Domestic labor availability is also larger than the conventional unemployment rate alone conveys, although its components are substantially different from one another. In September 2026, approximately **105.256 million people age 16 and older were outside the labor force**, of whom **5.631 million** reported that they currently wanted a job. Another **1.485 million** were classified as marginally attached to the labor force.[26]

Retirees, students, caregivers, disabled people and others voluntarily outside employment comprise much of the larger number. The smaller categories identify the more immediately relevant unused labor reserve.

The Higher-Skilled Escape Route

A further development now closes an important loop in this labor history. For decades, displacement of industrial and lower-skilled work was accompanied by the proposition that Americans could move upward through education into technical, scientific and professional occupations. The contemporary market for some of those workers—particularly new graduates and portions of computing and information technology—has itself become markedly less secure.

By the second quarter of 2026, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York placed unemployment among **recent college graduates at approximately 5.6%**, with **42% underemployed**—working in jobs that generally did

not require a college degree.[28] These figures encompass graduates across fields rather than STEM alone, but they establish a substantially weakened entry point into the professional labor market.

Within computing, the deterioration is more specific. The BLS annual average unemployment rate for **computer and mathematical occupations rose from 2.8% in 2024 to 3.3% in 2025**. The 2025 rates included **3.3% for software developers, 7.1% for software quality-assurance analysts and testers, 7.8% for web and digital-interface designers, and 10.6% for web developers**.^[29] The smaller occupational categories are inherently more volatile, but collectively they illustrate a technical employment market considerably less automatic than the long-standing prescription to “learn to code” or move into higher-skilled work would suggest.

Employment in **computer systems design and related services**, one of the largest core technology industries, likewise declined from approximately **2.623 million jobs in 2023 to 2.579 million in 2025** after decades of strong expansion.^[30] Software-publishing employment plateaued over much the same period after rapid growth through 2022.

This present weakness is not equivalent to the disappearance of STEM demand. BLS still projects 2025–35 employment growth of approximately **7.3% for computer and mathematical occupations, 6.8% for architecture and engineering, and 7.5% for life, physical and social science occupations**, all above the projected 3.5% rate for employment overall.^[31] The distinction is important: long-run occupational demand can remain favorable while workers encounter an immediate hiring contraction, diminished entry-level opportunity and greater competition for the available positions.

That development gives the earlier promise a striking historical symmetry. Industrial workers were repeatedly told that the economic future lay in education and skilled professional employment. Sanders’s long-running criticism of labor arbitrage explicitly anticipated the possibility that those replacement occupations could themselves become exposed to the same competitive pressures. The current difficulty facing portions of the technical workforce makes that question immediate rather than theoretical.

The author himself has both observed and been directly impacted by these trends as a credentialed technical worker. That experience supplies a measure of direct familiarity with the contemporary labor market while also constituting a personal interest in the subject, disclosed here accordingly.

The promise to rebuild domestic labor therefore operates across several fronts at once: immigration, guest-worker programs, training, wage formation, labor-force participation, industrial policy, trade policy and incentives affecting where American firms choose to employ people.

The 40-Year Through-Line

The consistent thread across this history is the American electorate’s recurring demand for **more work, better work, work performed inside the United States, and greater protection of the bargaining position of the people already here**.

The intensity of the immigration component has risen and fallen with conditions. Gallup found **65%** favoring decreased immigration in 1993 and 1995. The number reached **55% in 2024** during the most

recent immigration surge. By June 2026—after immigration flows had already fallen sharply—**29%** favored further decreases, 35% favored maintaining the existing level and 31% favored increasing it.[27]

The pattern is responsive to conditions. Perceived excess produces restrictionist pressure; visible reduction in the flow reduces the urgency for additional contraction.

The labor preference itself has been much more durable.

It appears in Reagan-era employer sanctions, the Perot insurgency, Clinton's border-and-jobs rhetoric, resistance to NAFTA, the Battle in Seattle, opposition to China's PNTR status, the **China Shock**, Sanders's multi-decade campaign against labor arbitrage, Trump's breakthrough in the industrial Midwest, Sanders's simultaneous rise from the left, the backlash against the Biden-era immigration surge, the contraction confronting portions of the professional and technical labor market, and Trump's return to office promising renewed priority for American production and American workers.

The American public has approached the question from different political directions and attached different weight to immigration, trade, wages, unions, industrial policy and corporate power. The common economic interest underneath them is readily identifiable.

Americans want protections for American jobs. They want more work created and retained inside the United States. They want wages capable of sustaining American living standards. And when immigration, guest-worker programs or trade practices are perceived to increase competition against those interests, they repeatedly demand restriction, reform or reversal.

The economics are not a simple one-worker-in, one-worker-out equation. Their distribution is more consequential than that. Immigration can enlarge national output while increasing competitive pressure on particular workers. Trade can lower consumer prices while inflicting severe, geographically concentrated losses on particular industries and communities—the central lesson of the **China Shock** literature.[32] Guest-worker programs can supply labor while also increasing employer leverage over both imported and domestic workers, a concern Sanders has articulated consistently across his trade and immigration positions.

For the individual worker, the national aggregate does not pay the mortgage.

That fundamental distinction—between what raises total economic activity and what secures the economic position of the American worker—has been one of the unresolved political questions running through the last 40 years.

It remains so today.

Notes and Sources

[1] Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, “Statement on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986,” November 6, 1986. Reagan described employer sanctions as the law’s “keystone and major element” for eliminating employment incentives for illegal immigration.

[2] E.J. Dionne Jr., *The Washington Post*, “Perot Leads Field in Poll,” June 8, 1992. The Washington Post/ABC survey reported Perot at 36% among registered voters and 38% among likely voters, against 30% for Bush and 26% for Clinton.

[3] Contemporary *Washington Post* coverage of Perot’s account of threats and the alleged disruption of his daughter’s wedding, including his acknowledgment of the evidentiary limitations of the claim.

[4] William J. Clinton, 1995 State of the Union address; Clinton administration material on illegal immigration and employment. Clinton explicitly connected illegal hiring with jobs, wages and working conditions for legal American workers.

[5] Gallup historical immigration polling. The share favoring decreased immigration reached 65% in July 1993 and June 1995.

[6] U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, historical H-1B program reports. USCIS records the original 65,000 limit, its first exhaustion in FY1997 and FY1998, increases to 115,000 in FY1999–2000, and the later 195,000 ceiling for FY2001–03.

[7] World Trade Organization accession records. WTO ministers approved China’s accession on November 10, 2001, and China became the WTO’s 143rd member on December 11, 2001.

[8] Daron Acemoglu, David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon Hanson and Brendan Price, NBER Working Paper 20395, *Import Competition and the Great U.S. Employment Sag of the 2000s*. Central estimates attribute approximately 2.0–2.4 million net U.S. job losses during 1999–2011 to increased Chinese import competition.

[9] David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson, NBER Working Paper 21906, *The China Shock: Learning from Labor Market Adjustment to Large Changes in Trade*. The study describes decade-long local effects including depressed wages and labor-force participation, elevated unemployment, job churning and reduced lifetime income.

[10] Office of Sen. Bernie Sanders, record of opposition to NAFTA, PNTR with China, Korea/CAFTA agreements and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

[11] Sanders’s subsequent H-1B statements explicitly connect the loss of blue-collar jobs through trade with the importation of guest labor into white-collar technical employment and state that it should never be cheaper to employ a guest worker than an American worker.

[12] Pew Research Center, 2017 Survey of U.S. Muslims. Among foreign-born Muslim adults, 30% had arrived since 2010 and another 26% during 2000–09.

[13] Pew Research Center, 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study. Jewish by religion: 1.7% of U.S. adults; Muslim: 1.2%.

[14] George W. Bush White House archival material on the 2007 comprehensive immigration proposal, including its contemplated Z-visa and temporary-worker framework and references to an unauthorized population of roughly 12 million.

[15] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration*, 2016. The review found very small long-run native-wage effects overall, with negative effects most likely among prior immigrants and native-born workers without high-school completion.

[16] Office of Sen. Bernie Sanders, May 2015 statements opposing the Trans-Pacific Partnership and identifying NAFTA, CAFTA and PNTR with China as central elements in his argument over middle-class decline and competition with lower-wage foreign labor.

[17] Office of Sen. Bernie Sanders, H-1B policy statements: qualified Americans should be hired first and employers should not receive a cost advantage from hiring guest workers.

[18] Congressional Budget Office, *The Demographic Outlook: 2025 to 2055*. CBO estimates total net immigration of approximately 1.5 million in 2021, 2.8 million in 2022, 3.3 million in 2023 and 2.7 million in 2024.

[19] Pew Research Center, 2025 estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population. Pew places the 2023 population at a record 14 million and the unauthorized workforce at 9.7 million, up from 7.8 million in 2021.

[20] Congressional Budget Office, *Effects of the Immigration Surge on the Federal Budget and the Economy*. CBO projects slower wage growth through 2026 among people already in the United States with 12 or fewer years of education because the additional supply of workers with similar skills puts downward pressure on wage growth.

[21] **Authorial election accounting.** Jeff Odis recognizes Trump as the winner of the 2016, 2020 and 2024 races. The certified federal record records Joseph Biden as the 2020 winner, **306 electoral votes to 232**. Vice President Mike Pence did not cast a deciding vote; he stated that the vice president lacked unilateral authority to determine which electoral votes would be counted and presided over Congress's electoral count. Major institutional and international election-observation records likewise recognize Biden as the certified 2020 winner.

[22] Federal Election Commission, official 2024 presidential general-election results: Donald Trump, **77,302,580 votes, 49.80%**.

[23] U.S. Census Bureau, January 2026 population estimates: net international migration peaked at approximately 2.7 million in 2024, declined to 1.3 million in 2025 and was projected at approximately 321,000 for 2026 if then-current trends continued.

[24] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Force Characteristics of Foreign-born Workers—2025*. Foreign-born workers accounted for **19.1% of the civilian labor force**.

[25] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2026 household data. Foreign-born employment: **31.253 million**; foreign-born civilian labor force: 32.279 million.

[26] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2026 Employment Situation. Not in labor force: **105.256 million**; currently wanting a job: **5.631 million**; marginally attached: **1.485 million**.

[27] Gallup immigration trend. Decreased immigration: 65% in 1993 and 1995; 55% in 2024; by June 2026, 29% favored decreasing immigration, 35% keeping it at its present level and 31% increasing it.

[28] Federal Reserve Bank of New York, *The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates*, 2026 Q2. Recent-college-graduate unemployment was approximately **5.6%** and underemployment approximately **42%**. The New York Fed defines recent graduates as ages 22–27 with a bachelor's degree or higher who are not currently enrolled in school.

[29] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Unemployment Levels and Rates by Detailed Occupation, 2025 Annual Averages*. Computer and mathematical occupations recorded **3.3% unemployment**, compared with 2.8% in 2024; detailed rates included software developers 3.3%, software QA analysts/testers 7.1%, web and digital-interface designers 7.8%, and web developers 10.6%.

[30] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics industry-productivity data for computer systems design and related services. Employment measured approximately **2.623 million in 2023, 2.591 million in 2024 and 2.579 million in 2025**.

[31] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025–35 Employment Projections. BLS projects employment growth of **7.3% in computer and mathematical occupations, 6.8% in architecture and engineering, and 7.5% in life, physical and social science occupations**, compared with 3.5% across all occupations.

[32] Autor, Dorn and Hanson's China Shock research identifies substantial adjustment costs and distributional consequences concentrated in exposed local labor markets despite consumer and aggregate gains from expanded trade.

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AI-assisted editorial tools were used for research verification, citation support, organization, and copyediting. The argument, perspective, conclusions, and final editorial decisions are the author's.

An American Labor Journey of the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries

Explored by Jeff Odgis, aka JdawgKaiSigma, attendant to his work as a Gamer Advocate.

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