

CHAPTER 25

America at Midcentury, 1945–1960

CHAPTER SUMMARY

After the Second World War, the United States experienced an uneasy and troubled transition to peace. Although the unemployment and higher education benefits of the GI Bill were intended, in part, to ease this transition by allowing veterans to be eased into civilian employment, those benefits did not affect the skyrocketing inflation rate and did not prevent a rash of strikes. Despite the fact that the Truman administration's handling of those problems led to widespread public discontent and to Republican victory in the 1946 congressional elections, to the surprise of most analysts, Truman won the presidential election of 1948. Furthermore, even though the transition to a peacetime economy was rocky at first, the economy quickly recovered and, as a result of consumer spending, increased agricultural productivity, and government programs, the United States entered an era of sustained economic growth and prosperity. One of the consequences of this prosperity was the "baby boom," which fueled more economic growth.

During the 1950s, white Americans increasingly fled from the cities to the suburbs, in part aided by federal policies for (white) veterans. Federal, state, and local expenditures on highway construction also spurred the growth of suburbia by allowing workers to live farther from their jobs in central cities.

Truman had to contend with the domestic consequences of the Korean War, which brought prosperity, combined with inflation and increased defense spending at the expense of the domestic programs of Truman's Fair Deal. Both the nature and length of the Korean War led to disillusionment and discontent on the part of many Americans. These factors, coupled with reports of influence peddling in the Truman administration, caused the President's approval rating to plummet and led to a Republican triumph in the presidential and congressional elections of 1952.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, a moderate Republican adopted the philosophy of "dynamic conservatism"; expanding Social Security and funding for education while promoting economic development through a tax reform program and the Atomic Energy Act. Despite Eisenhower's fiscal conservatism, the administration's activist foreign policy and three domestic economic recessions caused increased federal expenditures, decreased tax revenues, and deficit spending. As a result, Eisenhower oversaw only three balanced budgets during his eight years in office.

During this "age of consensus"—a period in which Americans agreed on their stance against communism and their faith in economic progress—many people, believing in the rightness of the American system, viewed reform and reformers in a negative light and saw conflict as the product of psychologically disturbed individuals, not as the product of societal ills. It is within this "consensus" context that, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the United States witnessed a wave of anti-Communist hysteria: the "Venona project"; Truman's loyalty probe; the "Hollywood Ten"; Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade. McCarthyism made resistance difficult, even for Eisenhower; as a result, liberals and conservatives joined to pass the Internal Security Act and the Communist Control Act, and cowered before McCarthy until his self-inflicted demise.

One group that challenged the consensus mood of the age was African Americans. In 1946, President Truman established the President's Committee on Civil Rights; the federal government, for the first time since Reconstruction, accepted responsibility for guaranteeing equality under the

law—civil rights—to African Americans. Work by the NAACP and decisions by the Supreme Court resulted in the slow erosion of the separate-but-equal doctrine and of black disfranchisement in the South. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* gave African Americans reason to believe that change was possible, although it was resisted in the south. A crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, resulted, and Eisenhower sent federal troops to enforce desegregation of the city's public schools. The Montgomery bus boycott, followed, as did the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and criticism concerning the ineffectiveness of the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

Many white middle-class Americans continued their mass migration to the Sunbelt that had begun during the war. In addition, a national, middle-class culture began to emerge, and many who were part of this culture were instructed in what behaviors were proper and expected of them through the national mass media, especially television. As Americans sought pleasure through the materialistic values of the era, they were also, paradoxically, drawn to organized religion in unprecedented numbers.

The postwar economic boom also affected the family. The changes it brought included the influence of Dr. Benjamin Spock on the parent-child relationship and the conflicting and changing roles of women as more entered the labor market. While society continued to stress the importance of “proper” female roles, attention was also directed to the “crisis of masculinity,” and, therefore, to the plight of the American male. Dr. Alfred Kinsey entered the culture in the late 1940s and early 1950s with his research on American attitudes toward sexual behavior. Moreover, a distinctive youth culture emerged, with its rock “n” roll critique, of American society and conformity.

Economic growth, inspired by government defense spending and by the growth of a more affluent population demanding more consumer goods and larger quantities of agricultural products, had a negative impact on the environment. Automobiles and factories polluted the air. Human and industrial waste polluted rivers, lakes, and streams. Pesticides endangered wildlife and humans alike, as did the waste from nuclear processing plants. Disposable products marketed as conveniences made America a “throw-away society.”

Prosperity did not bring about a meaningful redistribution of income in American society during the period under study. Therefore, many Americans (about 25 percent in 1962) lived in poverty. As before, the poor congregated in urban areas. African Americans, poor whites, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans continued their movement to low-income inner-city housing, while the more affluent city residents—mostly whites—continued their exodus to the suburbs. Although low-interest government housing loans made life in suburbia possible for many middle-class whites, government programs such as “urban renewal” often hurt the urban poor. The growth of agribusiness pushed many small farmers and tenant farmers off the land, which in turn swelled the ranks of the urban poor. Unfortunately, the burgeoning middle class often turned a blind eye to the poverty around them.

SECTION-BY SECTION IDENTIFICATIONS AND FOCUS QUESTIONS

I. Introduction

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain**

the historical significance of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social, economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

“Downwinders”

Why did the U.S. begin testing atomic bombs on American soil? How did the government justify the tests?

Was the government honest about the health risks those tests presented? What health impacts did those atomic tests have?

How might the residents of the new suburbs that became so prevalent in post-war America have answered the social critics who criticized the conformity and homogeneity of suburban life?

What sorts of influences helped shape post-war American society?

According to Kamensky, what was the “American Dream” in the post-war period?

What groups of Americans were excluded from the American Dream?

How would you summarize national politics in the Truman and Eisenhower years?

What was the American economy like in the post-war period?

II. Shaping Postwar America

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain the historical significance** of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social, economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

The National Mental Health Act of 1946

The Best Years of Our Lives

The G.I. Bill of Rights

The Baby Boom

Post World War II suburbanization

William Levitt and Levittown (see also p. 742)

The Highway Act (1956)
Redlining

What major domestic challenges faced Americans at the end of World War II?

What fears attended the demobilization of American servicemen? What challenges awaited demobilized servicemen and their families?

What economic fears accompanied the end of World War II in America? To what extent were those fears realized? Why? Why did the post-war economy ultimately become incredibly prosperous? (Pay special attention to the role federal programs and policies played in that prosperity.)

What inequalities were evident in the distribution of post-war government benefits?

III. Domestic Politics in the Cold War Era

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain the historical significance** of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social, economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

Harry S Truman
“The Buck Stops Here”*
Roosevelt’s “Second Bill of Rights”
The Full Employment Act (1946)
The Taft-Hartley Act (1947)
Thomas Dewey
Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party
Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats
The “Fair Deal”
Dwight D. Eisenhower
Dynamic conservatism
Sputnik (see also p. 748)
Eisenhower’s farewell address
The military-industrial complex
The era of “consensus”

How did Truman work to advance Roosevelt's New Deal? How successful was he? What obstacles and problems did he encounter in those efforts?

Why did labor disputes and strikes increase as the war ended? What position did President Truman take on labor issues in the post-war period?

Why did Republicans think they would win the election of 1948? What were the key issues in that election? How did Truman manage to win it?

Why did Truman support civil rights?

What factors helped the Republicans capture the White House in 1952?

Why didn't Eisenhower dismantle the New Deal and Fair Deal programs of Roosevelt and Truman, respectively?

How did Eisenhower actually implement his dynamic conservatism?

Why did Eisenhower find the military-industrial complex so problematic?

IV. Cold War Fears and Anticommunism

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain the historical significance** of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social, economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

The "Venona Project"

The Civil Defense program

"Duck and cover"

Red-baiting

Truman's loyalty program

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)

The Hollywood Ten

Rocky and His Friends

Senator Joseph McCarthy

McCarthyism

Blacklisting

"Reds, phonies, and 'parlor pinks'"

The Internal Security Act of 1950

The Communist Control Act of 1954
Richard Nixon
Alger Hiss
Ethel and Julius Rosenberg
The Army-McCarthy hearings
Joseph Welch (5 extra credit points for anyone who can identify the R.E.M. song that includes an audio clip of Welch's famous anti-McCarthy protest during the Army-McCarthy hearings)

What were Americans afraid of during the Cold War? To what extent were those fears justified? To what extent were those fears fueled by politicians for their own political gain?

What precedent existed for American anticommunism?

Why were alcoholics, homosexuals, and debtors considered "security risks"?

How did professors react to Berkeley's loyalty oath?

Why was McCarthy not a particularly creditable source?

Discuss McCarthy's role in the overall anticommunist crusade. Why was he as compelling as he was?

What leaders other than political ones embraced the anticommunist crusade?
Who were included among their victims?

Why was it so difficult for Americans, particularly politicians, to stand up against anticommunist excesses?

How did Congress participate in the anticommunist crusade?

How was McCarthy ultimately discredited?

What impact did the search for communists and communist spies have on American society?

V. The Struggle for Civil Rights

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain the historical significance** of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social,

economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

Isaac Woodard
The President's Committee on Civil Rights
To Secure These Rights
Thurgood Marshall, Charles Houston*, and the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund
Smith v. Allwright
Morgan v. Virginia
Shelley v. Kraemer
Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka
Earl Warren
Jackie Robinson
Rosa Parks
Martin Luther King, Jr.
The Montgomery Bus Boycott
Emmett Till
White Citizens' Councils
"The Southern Manifesto"
Orval E. Faubus, the Little Rock crisis, and the "Little Rock Nine"
The Civil Rights Act of 1957
The Southern Christian Leadership Conference

How did the Cold War both facilitate and impede the fight for racial equality in America?

How did World War II motivate blacks to push for their civil rights?

What contributions did Truman make to the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement? (Be specific.) What motivated him to pursue these measures?

Discuss the specific ways in which African-Americans fought for their civil rights.

Why was the new black middle class central to the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement?

Why did *Brown* not desegregate schools? How did the Little Rock crisis reveal that *Brown* could be more a hindrance than a help to desegregation?

Discuss methods of white resistance to desegregation. Why were they so effective?

What was Eisenhower's position on desegregation? How did his policies help and/or hinder desegregation? Compare it to Truman's, both in terms of methodology and effectiveness.

VI. Creating a Middle-Class Nation

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain the historical significance** of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social, economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

The transistor*
COLAs
"The Treaty of Detroit"
The Sunbelt
Leave It to Beaver
Father Knows Best
Billy Graham

In what ways was America becoming a more inclusive society in the post-war period? What limits were there to this inclusivity?

Why did Americans in the 1950s enjoy unprecedented levels of prosperity and economic security?

Why did the new middle class include blue collar workers along with white collar ones?

In what ways did government defense spending contribute to the emergence of the new middle class?

What caused the growth of the Sunbelt in the post-war years?

Why did a fairly monolithic middle-class culture emerge from suburbs full of people from different regions, ethnic cultures, and religions? How did the national mass media promote a national middle-class culture? What were the key elements of that middle-class culture?

Why role did consumption play in the formation (and identity) of the new middle class?

Why, with such impressive levels of economic prosperity, was consumer debt so

high in the 1950s?

Why was religion so important to the new middle-class culture?

VII. Men, Women, and Youth at Midcentury

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain the historical significance** of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social, economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

Dr. Spock, *Baby and Child Care*

Modern Woman: The Lost Sex

the “third sex”

the “crisis of masculinity”

William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (1956)

Dr. Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948)/*Human Female* (1953)

Hugh Hefner, *Playboy* magazine

the “youth culture”

Slinky, Mr. Potato Head, and Davey Crockett

James Dean’s *Rebel Without a Cause*

rock ‘n’ roll

Elvis Presley

Buddy Holly

Little Richard

Bill Haley and the Comets

The Ed Sullivan Show

The National Defense Education Act

Beat writers

What were post-war Americans most interested in doing?

What did the typical post-war American middle-class family look like? Why?

What roles were men and women expected to fill? Why?

What prompted many women to yearn for experiences beyond a suburban domestic life?

How did many women who worked outside the home justify their actions in the face of the powerful gender norms that pressured them to remain at home?

What kind of discrimination did women encounter in the post-war workplace?

What conflicting expectations did fifties men have to navigate?

What were the sexual norms of the era and how did Hugh Hefner challenge them?

How “rebellious” was the “rebellious youth” of the 1950s?

VIII. The Limits of the Middle-Class Nation

Identify each of the following items. That is, give an explanation or description of the item. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When? Then **explain the historical significance** of each item. That is, establish the historical context of the item: establish the item as the result of other factors existing in the society under study (that is, answer the question, Why?) and establish the political, social, economic and/or cultural consequences of the item (that is, answer the question, So What?)

John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window*

J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*

David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*

William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*

Invasion of the Body Snatchers

Planned obsolescence

Hanford, Washington, and Rocky Flats, Colorado

DDT

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

the “postindustrial economy”

the National Housing Act of 1949

1950s growth of agribusiness

Eisenhower’s “termination” policy

What prompted the bitter critiques of post-war American culture? To what extent were the criticisms unfounded?

What criticisms does Kamensky level at post-war America?

In this “age of abundance” what percentage of Americans lived in poverty?

How did the growth of agribusinesses exacerbate rural *and urban* poverty?

What ethnic group was America's poorest and how did Eisenhower's policies exacerbate that poverty?

IX. Legacy for a People and a Nation

When and why did Congress add the phrase "under God" to the existing Pledge of Allegiance? Why is that phrase controversial?

X. Final Review Questions

How did the Cold War affect American society and politics?

How did federal government actions following World War II change the nation?

During the 1950s, many people began to think of their country as a middle-class nation. To what extent were they correct?