

Chapter 29 Outline - America at Midcentury, 1945–1960

- I. Introduction

During the post-World War II era the choices Americans made in their personal lives, their domestic policies, and international relations were shaped by memories of the preceding sixteen years of depression and war. These choices began a profound reconfiguration of American society that changed the meanings of class and ethnicity and caused the emergence of a new American Dream based on the family and on a shared belief in anti-communism and in the importance of economic progress. This consensus lasted throughout the era despite growing social tensions.

- II. Shaping Postwar America

- A. The Veterans Return

Approximately 15 million servicemen were demobilized between 1945 and 1947. Homecomings were welcomed events, but caused concerns about veterans' mental and physical health as well as the lack of sufficient jobs.

- B. The GI Bill

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill, showed gratitude to veterans by providing unemployment benefits, low-interest loans, and educational expenses.

- C. Economic Growth

Fueled by consumer spending, the economy, after a difficult first year adjustment to peace, recovered quickly and rocketed on a twenty-five year boom.

With factories around the world in ruins, U.S. corporations expanded their global dominance, often forming huge conglomerates.

The agricultural sector contributed to economic growth with increased farm production resulting from continued mechanization and increased use of fertilizers and pesticides.

Government programs, such as the GI Bill of Rights, also fueled economic growth.

- D. Baby Boom

The baby boom was both a cause and effect of prosperity. The highest birth rate in American history increased demand for houses and schools.

- E. Suburbanization

People left cities and moved to the suburbs for a variety of reasons.

Suburbanization created a greater demand for houses. Contractors erected rows of houses in record time to facilitate this housing demand.

Low-interest GI mortgages and Federal Housing Administration mortgage insurance helped many people afford homes.

The Highway Act of 1956 appropriated billions of dollars for the construction of a modern interstate highway system. Federal expenditures on highways made formerly isolated rural areas accessible to average Americans, a development that hastened suburbanization and promoted uniform lifestyles across the nation.

- F. Inequality of Benefits

Postwar federal programs did not benefit all Americans equally. There were inequities based on both gender and race.

• III. Domestic Politics in the Cold War Era

○ A. Harry S Truman and Postwar Liberalism

Truman's legislative program was designed to maintain the federal government's active role in guaranteeing social welfare, promoting social justice, managing the economy, and regulating the power of corporations.

Because of opposition from a coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats, Truman enjoyed few legislative successes. Public discontent caused a dramatic decline in Truman's approval rating.

○ B. Postwar Strikes and the Taft-Hartley Act

Difficulties converting to a peacetime economy resulted in strikes, inflation, and general economic struggles for many people. President Truman personally intervened to avert strikes in industries deemed vital to national security.

○ C. 1948 Election

Republicans expressed great confidence during the election campaign, especially since the Democrats splintered at their convention. Nevertheless, Truman won.

○ D. Truman's Fair Deal

After the 1948 election, President Truman proposed civil rights legislation, national health insurance, and federal aid for education. Once again, however, little of Truman's legislative agenda was enacted.

The Korean War sparked an inflationary spiral. The war also led to reservists and national guardsmen being called to active duty.

By 1951, Truman's approval rating was at an all-time low of 23 %

- E. Eisenhower's Dynamic Conservatism

Eisenhower recognized that dismantling New Deal and Fair Deal programs was politically impossible.

Eisenhower adopted a policy of being conservative when it comes to money and liberal when it comes to human beings.

- F. Growth of the Military-Industrial Complex

Eisenhower pursued policies friendly to business and industry.

As he left the White House, Eisenhower warned the American people of the "military-industrial complex."

The era has been labeled the era of "consensus." Liberal Democrats and moderate Republicans occupied what has been called "the vital center." The Cold War was seen as a battle between good and evil. Criticism of American society seemed unpatriotic.

- IV. Cold War Fears and Anticommunism

- A. Espionage and Nuclear Fears

The Soviet Union was spying on the United States to obtain nuclear secrets.

The public fear of nuclear war contributed to American anticommunism.

- B. The Politics of Anticommunism

Truman used alarmist language concerning the communist threat.

Republicans used redbaiting techniques against Democratic opponents.

In 1947, Truman ordered loyalty investigations of federal workers.

House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) went on the attack against Hollywood in 1947. The “Hollywood Ten” were imprisoned. Studio executives blacklisted hundreds of actors, screenwriters, and directors suspected of communist affiliations.

- C. McCarthyism and the Growing “Witch Hunt”

When Senator Joseph McCarthy announced that communists controlled the State Department, he started the hysteria that became known as McCarthyism.

- D. Anticommunism in Congress

Congress passed the Internal Security Act in 1950 and the Communist Control Act in 1954.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities investigated a former State Department official, Alger Hiss, for his links to communist spies.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of treason and executed in 1953.

- E. Waning of the Red Scare

In the Army-McCarthy hearings, McCarthy made a crucial error by accusing the Army of harboring communists during televised Senate hearings.

- V. The Struggle for Civil Rights

- A. Growing Black Political Power

Black migrations to the North and West led to a shift in the political composition of those regions.

The report of Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights shaped

government policy for twenty years.

In 1948, Truman issued an executive order proclaiming a policy of “fair employment throughout the federal establishment” and creating the Employment Board of the Civil Service Commission.

In a second executive order in 1948, Truman ended segregation in the armed forces.

- B. Supreme Court Victories and School Desegregation

African Americans benefited from court decisions in the late 1940s.

In 1954, the Supreme Court declared segregated public schools unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

- C. Montgomery Bus Boycott

African Americans protested segregated public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama, by staging a massive boycott of the bus system.

Using the tactics of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience, Martin Luther King Jr. led the bus boycott, beginning his leadership of the civil rights movement.

Thirteen months after the bus boycott began, the Supreme Court ruled Alabama’s bus segregation laws unconstitutional.

- D. White Resistance

White Citizens Councils were formed in many southern communities to resist school desegregation.

Whites determined to keep African Americans out of their neighborhood provoked a race riot in Cicero, Illinois, in 1951.

- E. Federal Authority and States' Rights

Eisenhower objected to a federal role in civil rights, thereby tacitly encouraging resistance to integration.

When Arkansas tried to block integration of a Little Rock high school, Eisenhower intervened to force compliance.

In 1957, Congress passed the first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction. This act created the United States Commission on Civil Rights, but proved to be ineffective.

- VI. Creating a Middle-Class Nation

- A. Prosperity for More Americans

The economic growth of the period was driven by consumer spending as Americans' appetites for consumer goods increased.

Unionized workers gained wage increases after the war, and they could lead middle-class lifestyles previously reserved for the white-collar workers.

- B. Sunbelt and Economic Growth

Postwar defense spending shifted economic development from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and Southwest, a process that began during the war years. This brought new economic prosperity to the region known as the Sunbelt.

Millions of Americans began to move to the Sunbelt to take advantage of the prosperity in the region.

- C. A New Middle-Class Culture

In 1957, for the first time a majority of families had incomes in the middle-class range. As more blue-collar workers participated in middle-class culture, the lines separating working class and middle

class blurred.

- D. Whiteness and National Culture

In the 1950s, the U.S. population was more homogeneous than before or since.

In the suburbs, people of different backgrounds came together and adopted the norms of the developing national middle class.

- E. Television

The newest luxury item, television, fostered a shared national culture by giving Americans a shared set of experiences. Television also taught many Americans how to be middle class.

- F. Consumer Culture

Newly prosperous Americans had a variety of consumer goods from which to choose and embraced the new consumer culture.

- G. Religion

Membership in religious congregations grew steadily in the 1950s.

- VII. Men, Women, and Youth at Midcentury

- A. Marriage and Families

Marriage at an early age was the trend in the 1950s. Most newlyweds quickly had children.

- B. Gender Roles in 1950s Families

Men and women usually had distinctive roles in families of the 1950s.

There were a number of incentives for women to stay at home, and

many devoted their energies to family life.

- C. Women and Work

Although women were expected to be full-time housewives, women continued to enter the labor force. However, due to occupational segregation, full-time female workers made only 60 percent of what male full-time workers made.

- D. “Crisis of Masculinity”

Mass-circulation magazines of the 1950s proclaimed that men faced a “crisis of masculinity.”

- E. Sexuality

Dr. Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* made many Americans aware they were not alone in breaking the sexual rules of the era.

- F. Youth Culture

The music industry catered to youth, and youngsters found subtle ways to rebel against social norms. Movies were successful because of the attendance of young Americans.

- G. Challenges to Middle-Class Culture

Beat writers rejected both middle class social decorum and contemporary literary conventions. The Beats laid the groundwork for the 1960s counterculture.

- VIII. The Limits of the Middle-Class Nation

- A. Critics of Conformity

Critics condemned the new middle-class culture as a wasteland of

conformity, homogeneity, and ugly consumerism.

- B. Environmental Degradation

Postwar American culture was built on massive consumption of the world's resources.

Development led to damage to the environment, but most Americans remained oblivious to the problems.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* alerted Americans to the dangers of DDT, one of the most damaging pesticides used by Americans.

- C. Continuing Racism

Race remained a major dividing line in American society.

- D. Poverty in an Age of Abundance

More than one out of every five Americans lived in poverty.

Most of the poor settled in cities, and African Americans made up the bulk of the urban poor.

Latin Americans immigrated to the United States in increasing numbers and often found their chances for advancement limited by discrimination.

Tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and migratory farm workers often lived in poverty.

Native Americans were the nation's poorest people, and their lives were made worse by Eisenhower's termination policy. Accustomed to reservation life, many had great difficulty adjusting to life in the cities.