

## Chapter 41

# Peace, Prosperity, and Progress

*Why are the 1950s remembered as an age of affluence?*

### 41.1 Introduction

D. J. Waldie grew up in the 1950s in Lakewood, California, a community located 15 miles south of Los Angeles. In 1949, Lakewood was 3,500 acres of lima bean fields. A year later, houses were rising out of the farm fields at a rate of 50 homes a day. By 1953, some 90,000 people lived in Lakewood, making it the fastest-growing housing development in the world.

The Depression and World War II had greatly slowed home construction. Once the war ended, however, millions of soldiers returned home to marry and start families. The developers of Lakewood were betting that those families would soon be looking for a place to live. Still, Waldie later wrote, “No theorist or urban planner had the experience then to gauge how thirty thousand former GIs and their wives would take to frame and stucco houses on small, rectangular lots next to hog farms and dairies.”

Some local businesspeople predicted that Lakewood would be an instant slum—or worse, a ghost town. They could not have been more wrong. “Buyers did not require encouragement,” recalled Waldie.

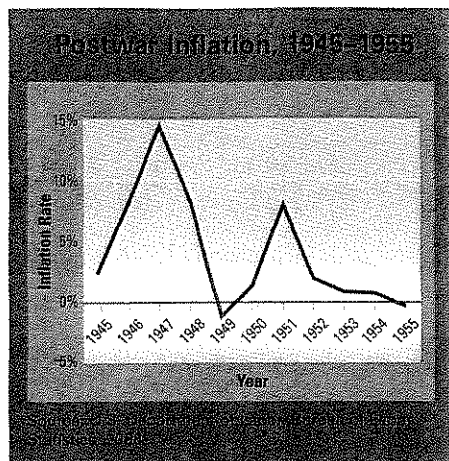
When the sales office opened on a cloudless Palm Sunday in April 1950, twenty-five thousand people were waiting . . . Salesmen sold 30 to 50 houses a day, and more than 300 during one weekend, when the first unit of the subdivision opened. At one point, salesmen sold 107 houses in an hour.

—D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*, 1996

For these white, middle-class homebuyers, owning a house in Lakewood was a symbol of their new affluence, or prosperity. Aided by the GI Bill of Rights, veterans could buy a home with no money down. All they needed was a steady job and a promise to keep up with the house payments. As a Lakewood salesperson said of his job, “We sell happiness in homes.”



Suburbs like Lakewood, California, made it possible for many people to buy their first home. A two-bedroom house in Lakewood sold for \$7,575. Every house came with up-to-date features like stainless-steel kitchen counters and an electric garbage disposal. In this photograph, prospective buyers walk along a street of model homes in 1951.



Inflation is a general rise in the price of goods and services over an extended period of time. If a worker's wages stay the same but prices go up, the worker can afford to buy fewer things. As the graph shows, inflation spiked after wartime price controls were lifted in 1946. Prices also rose because the demand for consumer goods after the war far outstripped the supply.

## 41.2 Postwar Politics: Readjustments and Challenges

Harry Truman had never wanted to be president. The day after he learned of Franklin Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945, he told reporters,

Boys, if you ever pray, pray for me now. I don't know whether you fellows ever had a load of hay fall on you, but when they told me yesterday what had happened, I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me.

—Harry Truman, 1945

Truman's first task was to bring the war to an end. Once that was done, he faced the enormous challenge of leading the country back to a peacetime economy.

**A Rocky Transition to Peace** Truman welcomed the war's end by announcing a package of reforms that later came to be known as the **Fair Deal**. He called on Congress to increase the minimum wage, increase aid to agriculture and education, and enact a national health insurance program. Complaining that Truman was "out-New Dealing the New Deal," Republicans in Congress did their best to stall his reforms.

Meanwhile, the economy was going through a difficult period of adjustment. As the war came to a close, government officials canceled billions of dollars' worth of war contracts. As a result, millions of defense workers lost their jobs. In addition, once wartime price controls were lifted, prices skyrocketed.

As **inflation** soared, workers demanded wage increases. When employers refused to meet these demands, labor unions triggered the largest strike wave in U.S. history. In 1946, nearly 5 million workers walked off the job, many of them in such key industries as steel production, coal mining, and oil refining.

When railroad workers went on strike, Truman took action. In a speech to Congress, he warned, "Food, raw materials, fuel, shipping, housing, the public health, the public safety—all will be dangerously affected" if the strike were allowed to continue. Truman threatened to call out the armed forces to run the railroads. However, the strike was settled before he could carry out his threat.

**Truman Battles a Republican Congress** The labor unrest was still fresh in voters' minds as the 1946 congressional elections drew near. Running under the slogan "Had Enough?" Republican candidates swept to victory. For the first time since the 1920s, Republicans gained control of both houses of Congress.

One of the first actions of the new Republican Congress was passage of the Twenty-second Amendment in 1947. This amendment limits a president to two terms of office. The Republican sponsors of the amendment did not want to see another liberal president like Franklin Roosevelt seek four terms as president. They argued that without term limits, a popular president might seek to become "president for life," much like a dictator. The amendment was overwhelmingly ratified by the states and was added to the Constitution in 1951.

Congress also took aim at the labor unions by passing the **Taft-Hartley Act** in 1947. This law placed many limits on the power of unions. Among other things, it outlawed the closed shop. A closed shop is a workplace in which the employer agrees to hire only members of a particular union. It banned sympathy



These workers are on strike against the Inland Steel Company in Indiana Harbor, Indiana, in 1946. To resolve such strikes, President Harry Truman appointed fact-finding boards to hear workers' complaints. Usually, the boards recommended wage increases.

strikes, in which workers of one union walk off their jobs to show their sympathy with another striking union. It also allowed the president to impose an 80-day "cooling off" period before a union could strike in certain industries. This provision especially enraged union supporters, who called it "slave labor law." President Truman vetoed the law, but Congress passed it over his veto.

Truman also battled with Congress over civil rights. Late in 1946, he established the President's Committee on Civil Rights to investigate racial inequality in the United States. The committee issued a report calling for an end to segregation and discrimination in voting, housing, education, employment, and the military. Truman praised the report as "an American charter of human freedom." Congress, however, refused to act on its recommendations. In 1948, Truman sidestepped Congress and desegregated the armed forces by executive order.

**An Upset Victory in 1948** As the election of 1948 drew near, Democrats were filled with gloom. Truman, who had been unable to get any of his reforms passed by the Republican Congress, looked like a weak candidate. Worse yet, the Democratic Party had splintered into three factions.

Left-wing Democrats, led by former U.S. vice president Henry Wallace, pulled away to form the Progressive Party. Wallace was more liberal than Truman on domestic issues. But his main difference with the president was over foreign policy. Fearing that Truman's hard-line containment policy could lead to World War III, he advocated friendlier relations with the Soviet Union.

Segregationist southern Democrats, known as Dixiecrats, left to form the States' Rights Democratic Party. The Dixiecrats nominated Strom Thurmond, the governor of South Carolina, for the presidency. Thurmond ran on a platform of complete segregation of the races.

The Republicans nominated New York governor Thomas E. Dewey to run against Truman. Dewey was heavily favored to win, despite his lackluster campaign style. One newspaper ran this parody of the typical, bland Dewey speech: "Agriculture is important. Our rivers are full of fish. You cannot have freedom without liberty. Our future lies ahead."



The 1948 election was a huge political upset for pollsters and headline writers. On election night, some newspapers printed the next day's edition before the results were final. A gleeful Truman holds up the morning edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, which had predicted the wrong outcome.



Once Dwight D. Eisenhower's "I like Ike" campaign got rolling, it never stopped. The 1952 presidential campaign was the first to make extensive use of television ads. One observer complained that campaigns were "selling the president like toothpaste."

Truman decided to fight for the presidency. He launched an ambitious "whistle-stop" tour of the country. A whistle-stop is a small town where a train would stop only if signaled to do so by a whistle. During his tour, Truman made 356 stops to speak directly voters. At every one, he lambasted the "do nothing" Republican Congress. His supporters cheered him on with the slogan, "Give 'em hell, Harry!"

On election eve, opinion polls predicted a Dewey landslide. Only Truman seemed to believe he could win. The voters proved Truman right. In one of the biggest electoral upsets in history, Truman narrowly won reelection.

For the next four years, Truman regularly presented his Fair Deal programs to Congress. However, a coalition of conservative southern Democrats and mid-western Republicans blocked most of his reform efforts. Congress did agree to a modest expansion of Social Security benefits. It also agreed to increase the minimum wage and support slum clearance.

**Ike Takes the Middle of the Road** During the 1952 election season, the Democratic Party came together again around Adlai Stevenson, the governor of Illinois. Stevenson was much admired for his elegant speaking style and wit.

The Republicans nominated the immensely popular war hero Dwight D. Eisenhower. Eisenhower had an impressive biography. After serving as supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II, he had gone on to become head of NATO. Moreover, people loved Eisenhower's winning smile and agreeable manner. Building on his nickname, Ike, the Republican campaign featured posters and buttons saying, "I like Ike."

Richard Nixon, a young senator from California, was chosen to be Eisenhower's running mate. A strong anticommunist, Nixon had gained prominence as a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In the election, Eisenhower swept to victory in 39 of the 48 states. Four years later, he again defeated Stevenson to win a second term as president.

During his presidency, Eisenhower embraced a program he described as "modern Republicanism." He promised to be "conservative when it comes to money and liberal when it comes to human beings." He resisted calls by conservatives to roll back the New Deal. "Should any political party attempt to abolish Social Security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs," he warned, "you would not hear of that party again in our political history." Eisenhower went further and expanded Social Security. By doing so, he ensured that this popular New Deal program would survive no matter which party controlled the White House.

At the same time, Eisenhower presided over a massive peacetime arms buildup. "Our arms," he stated, "must be mighty, ready for instant action." Still, he worried about the growing power of what he called the "military-industrial complex." In his last address as president, Eisenhower warned,

This conjunction [joining] of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience . . . We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet . . . we must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.

—Dwight D. Eisenhower, Farewell Address, 1961

### 41.3 Economic Growth Creates an Age of Affluence

In 1940, Dick and Mac McDonald opened a drive-in restaurant in San Bernardino, California. The restaurant was popular, but customers sometimes had to wait as long as 20 minutes for their food. Dick McDonald later recalled,

The cars were jamming up the lot. Customers weren't demanding it, but our intuition told us they would like speed. Everything was moving faster. The supermarkets and dime stores had already converted to self-service, and it was obvious the future of drive-ins was self-service.

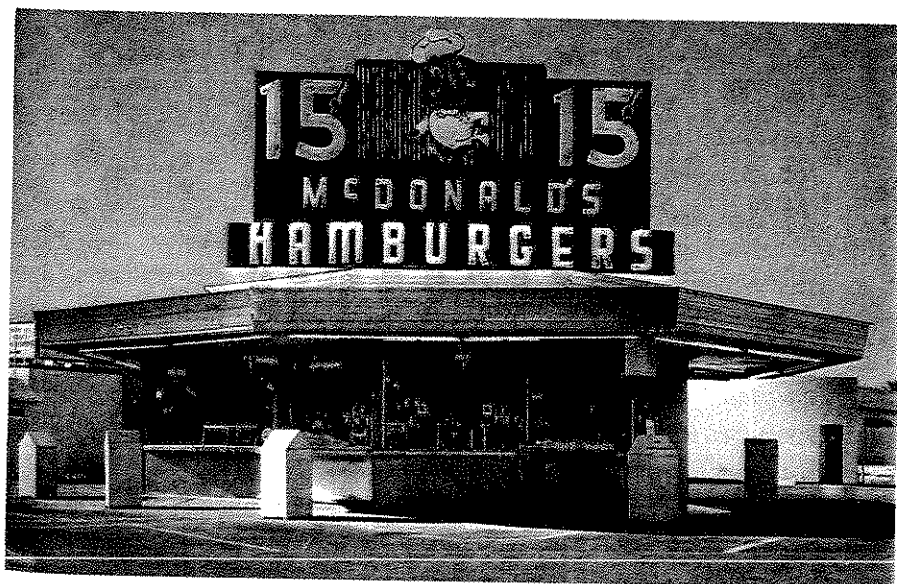
—Dick McDonald

So the brothers decided to streamline every aspect of their business. Instead of offering hamburgers, hot dogs, and sandwiches, they narrowed the menu to hamburgers. They replaced carhops with a self-service order counter. Instead of serving food on plates and glasses that needed washing, they used paper wrappers and cups. They set up the kitchen to run like an assembly line.

Their timing could not have been better. When they reopened their restaurant as McDonald's Famous Hamburgers in 1948, the country was entering one of the greatest economic booms in its history. By the end of the 1950s, middle-class families were enjoying a level of affluence beyond anything their Depression-era parents and grandparents could have imagined.

**Consumer Demand Spurs Economic Growth** During World War II, Americans had saved billions of dollars. Flush with cash, they were ready to go on a spending spree as soon as factories could convert from war production to consumer goods. This surge in consumer demand encouraged businesses to expand production. By 1955, the United States, with only 6 percent of the world's population, was producing almost half of the world's goods.

As the economy grew, incomes rose. **Real income** is income measured by the amount of goods and services it will buy, regardless of inflation. By the mid-1950s, the average American family had twice as much real income to spend as the average family of the 1920s had. And spend it they did.



The McDonald brothers developed an assembly-line process to speed service and lower costs. At the original McDonald's, shown here, customers could receive their meal in as little as 15 seconds after placing an order.



Rising incomes, easy credit, and aggressive marketing helped create a culture of consumption in the 1950s. This department store took window shopping to a new level with a machine called the "Tell-it-to." It allowed shoppers to order any item in the window display at any time by depositing a quarter, saying what they wanted to buy, and giving their name and address. The orders were delivered the following morning.

Not only were Americans spending more money than ever before, they were also spending it in different places. In the past, most people had bought their goods in stores lining the main street of town. By the mid-1950s, however, suburban shopping centers were luring consumers away from downtown shopping districts. Shopping centers offered customers easy parking and a wide array of shops to browse, often in air-conditioned comfort. By 1964, there were more than 7,600 shopping centers across the United States.

Businesses used methods pioneered during the 1920s to encourage consumers to keep on spending. One method was slick advertising campaigns. By 1955, businesses were spending \$8 billion a year on ads that encouraged consumption.

Another method was to offer consumers easier ways to buy now and pay later. Large stores issued charge cards that allowed their customers to charge goods to an account rather than pay cash. By 1960, Sears Roebuck had more than 10 million accounts, or one for every five families. In 1958, American Express launched the first all-purpose credit card that could be used in stores, hotels, restaurants, and gas stations.

A third method used to encourage consumption was called **planned obsolescence**. Brooks Stevens, the industrial designer who popularized this term, defined it as a way to create "the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary." Businesses using this method looked for ways to make what a consumer bought today seem obsolete, or out-of-date, after a fixed period of time. Clothing companies did this by introducing new fashions every season. As they did so, last season's garments, although still usable, looked dated. Automobile companies did the same thing by changing the styling of their cars every year.

**The Economy Begins to Shift from Goods to Services** When the 1950s began, the U.S. economy was dominated by industries that produced such goods as steel, appliances, and cars. By the end of the decade, industries that provided services, rather than manufacturing goods, were growing in importance. The biggest and best-known manufacturing company was the automaker General Motors. In 1955, GM became the first U.S. corporation to earn more than \$1 billion a year. It accomplished this feat by producing and selling as many cars as all of its competitors produced combined.

An important factor in GM's success was an improved relationship with its workers. In 1948, GM signed a historic agreement with the United Auto Workers union. The agreement guaranteed that GM workers would receive regular wage hikes tied to a **cost-of-living index**. A cost-of-living index measures differences in the price of goods and services over time. If inflation pushes prices up, the index measures by how much prices went up. *Fortune* magazine called the agreement "the treaty of Detroit." It brought GM years of labor peace.

As the economic boom continued, new service industries began to compete for the consumer's dollar. One was the fast-food service industry. In 1954, a go-getter named Ray Kroc visited McDonald's Famous Hamburgers in San Bernardino. He was amazed by what he saw. An hour before lunch, there was already a long line of customers waiting to be served. Kroc asked people in line what they liked about the restaurant. They replied that it was clean, fast,



and cheap. In addition, the burgers tasted good, and it was not necessary to tip anyone.

Kroc convinced the McDonald brothers to hire him as a franchising agent. A **franchise** is an agreement to operate a business that carries a company's name and sells its products. The next year, he opened his own franchise restaurant in Des Plaines, Illinois. Like the original, Kroc's McDonald's was wildly successful. It was especially attractive to families with young children who did not feel comfortable in more formal restaurants. Under Kroc's leadership, hundreds of McDonald's soon dotted the landscape. By 1963, the fast-food chain had sold more than 1 billion hamburgers.

Another new service industry, the motel chain, was inspired by a summer driving trip. In 1951, Kemmons Wilson, a homebuilder in Tennessee, took his family on a car trip to Washington, D.C. Day after day, he faced the problem of finding a decent place for his family to spend the night. Motels at that time were independent, mom-and-pop operations. Some were clean. Others were filthy. Some charged extra for children. Others did not. The only way to find out was to go from one motel to the next.

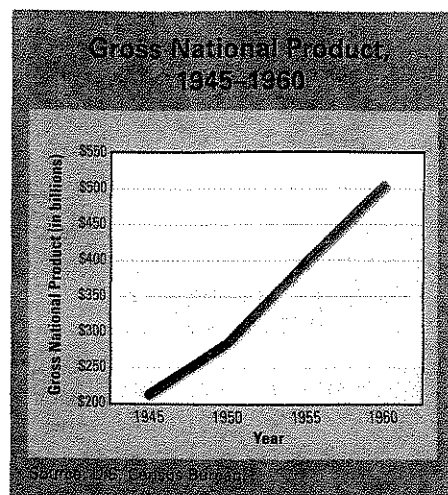
A frustrated Wilson finally turned to his wife and announced he was going into the motel business. She asked how many motels he planned to build. "Oh, about four hundred," he answered. "That ought to cover the country." His motels would be clean, affordable, easy to find, and family-friendly. "If I never do anything else worth remembering in my life," he added, "children are going to stay free at my motels."

Wilson returned home and built his first Holiday Inn. After franchising his chain, the number of Holiday Inns grew rapidly. Other chains, such as Best Western and Howard Johnson's, also began to expand. By the 1960s, the motel chain had become a fixture on America's highways.

**The Workforce Shifts from Blue- to White-Collar Jobs** As the economy grew and changed, the kinds of work people did also changed. When the 1950s began, **blue-collar workers** made up the largest part of the workforce. Blue-collar workers are people who work in factories or at skilled trades, such as plumbing or auto repair. Most are paid by the hour. The name comes from the durable blue shirts that manual workers often wore to work.

By the end of the 1950s, the workforce looked different. For the first time in history, **white-collar workers** outnumbered blue-collar employees. White-collar workers include professionals such as doctors and lawyers, engineers, salespeople, managers, and office staff. Most receive a weekly or yearly salary rather than an hourly wage. Because white-collar employees worked in offices, they could wear white shirts to work without fear of getting them dirty.

Both groups prospered during the 1950s. As blue-collar workers moved up into the middle class, they began to dress, act, and consume like their white-collar neighbors. "During the war," observed a sociologist in Detroit, "you could sit on a streetcar and tell at a glance who were the [blue-collar] defense workers and who were the white collars . . . Today you just can't tell who's who."



At the end of World War II, many economists feared the economy would once again fall into a depression. Instead, consumer spending helped spur a long period of economic growth. The nation's productivity more than doubled from 1945 to 1960.



During the 1950s, the number of people holding white-collar office jobs grew rapidly. White-collar workers were far less likely to belong to labor unions than their blue-collar neighbors.



This happy bride preparing for her wedding was part of the marriage boom that followed World War II. An article in the *New York Times Magazine* warned, "A girl who hasn't a man in her sight by the time she is 20 is not altogether wrong in fearing that she may never get married."

#### 41.4 Marriage, Families, and a Baby Boom

The year 1946 was one second old when a navy machinist's wife gave birth to a baby girl in Philadelphia. In Chicago, seconds after the new year began, a son was born to the wife of an army trombone player in Chicago. For both sets of parents, these births may have been long-awaited and happy events. But for demographers who study the growth of human populations, these births marked the beginning of the largest population boom in U.S. history.

**A Marriage Boom Leads to a Baby Boom** During the Depression, marriage rates and birthrates had dropped as worries about the future caused people to postpone decisions that would change their lives. After World War II ended, the future looked brighter. In 1946, there were almost 2.3 million marriages in the United States, an increase of more than 600,000 from the year before. More people were marrying—and at younger ages—than during the war years. The average age of marriage in the 1950s was 20 for women and 22 for men.

Many of these newlyweds started families right away. Older couples who had delayed having children also began to start families. "It seems to me," observed a visitor from Great Britain, "that every other young housewife I see is pregnant." The result was a **baby boom**, a large increase in the number of babies born in proportion to the size of the population. At the peak of the baby boom, in 1957, 4.3 million births were recorded. By 1964, the last baby boom year, four Americans in ten were under the age of 20.

Economists and businesspeople were thrilled by the baby boom. Signs in New York City subway cars informed riders that

Your future is great in a growing America.

Every day 11,000 babies are born in America.

This means new business, new jobs, new opportunities.

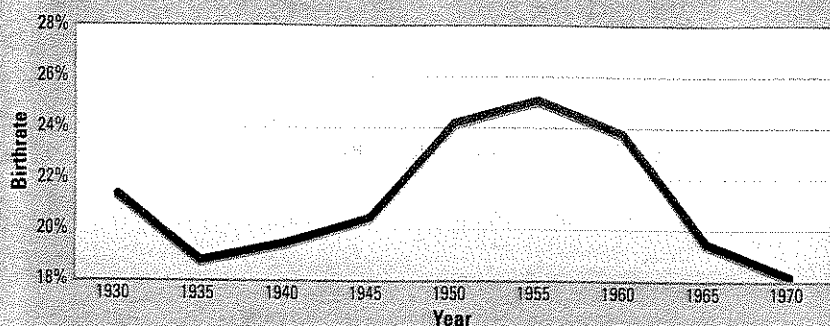
The babies overflowing maternity wards boosted sales for diaper services and baby food bottlers. Home sales boomed as young families flocked to the suburbs in search of living space. Factories worked overtime to fill these new homes with furniture and appliances and to put a car in every garage.

Schools had trouble finding room for the millions of children reaching school age each year. During the 1950s, California opened new schools at the rate of one a week to make room for the baby boomers. Older schools added temporary buildings to create more classrooms. Other schools handled the flood by running two shifts of classes, one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Despite these efforts, large classes with two students to a desk were common during the 1950s.

**Family Roles: Working Dads and Stay-at-Home Moms** The majority of baby boomers grew up in so-called traditional families, with dads who went to work each day and moms who stayed home. The importance of marriage and family was driven home in marriage manuals of the day. "Whether you are a man or a woman, the family is the unit to which you most genuinely belong," wrote Dr. John Schindler in *The Woman's Guide to Better Living 52 Weeks a Year*. "The family is the center of your living. If it isn't, you've gone far astray."



## U.S. Birthrate, 1930-1970



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

The economic prosperity that followed World War II triggered a baby boom that lasted until 1964. Then, almost as suddenly as it began, the boom ended. By 1966, the birthrate had dropped below the lowest level seen during the Depression years. In just two years, the baby boom had become a baby bust.

The belief that mothers should not work outside the home unless they had to for economic reasons was promoted by Dr. Benjamin Spock, the leading child-care expert of the day. First published in 1946, Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* was a best seller for many years. Spock advised mothers to devote themselves full-time to raising their children. Any distraction from that task, such as a job or hobby, he argued, could damage a young child.

The mass media reinforced traditional family roles. Magazines, movies, and advertisements portrayed the ideal family as one in which the husband was the breadwinner while the wife stayed home. The homemaker's role was expanded to include a number of jobs. A mom became a teacher, doctor, nurse, cook, adviser, decorator, housekeeper, manager, and chauffeur all in one.

A new medium called television brought this ideal family to life on screen. In *Leave It to Beaver*, June Cleaver was a stay-at-home mom who wore high heels and pearls while working in the kitchen. When asked what kind of girl her son Wally should marry, she answered, "Oh, some sensible girl from a nice family . . . who's a good cook and can keep a nice house and see that he's happy." Jim Anderson, the sensible dad in *Father Knows Best*, calmly solved his family's problems when he got home from work. In one episode, he advised his tomboy daughter Kathy to act helpless around boys. "The worst thing you can do," he told her, "is to try to beat a man at his own game."

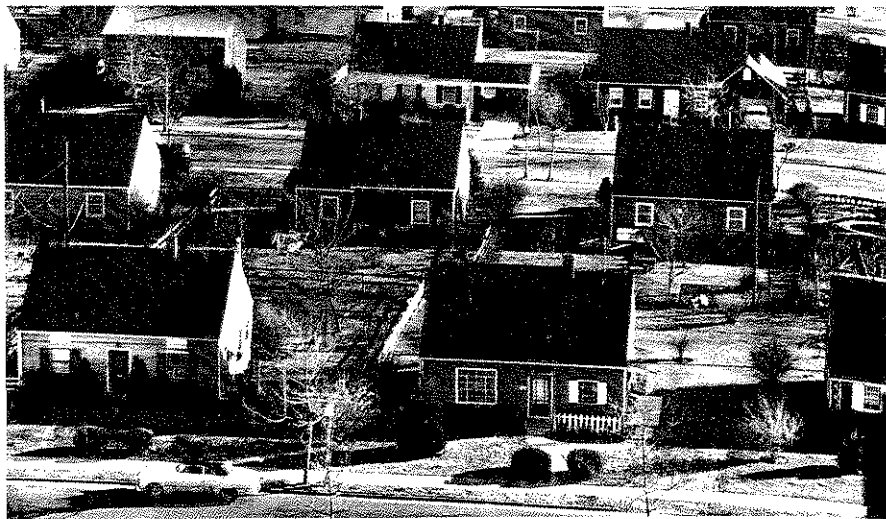
Such television shows taught children the roles they would be expected to play as adults. Children got the message in other ways, too. Toy stores were filled with dolls and tea sets for girls and toy guns for boys. Girls were given miniature hope chests to encourage them to dream of one day getting married. Children's books reinforced traditional roles with sayings like this one, from *The Happy Family*, a Little Golden Book popular at the time: "The happiest time of the day is when Father comes home from work."

The strong emphasis on marriage led many young women to forgo a college education. College enrollment among women dropped sharply. And although some women pursued careers after college, many others dropped out early to get married or headed from graduation straight into marriage. A professor at Smith College complained of having to cancel a final class with female senior honors students because it conflicted with too many bridal showers.



In the "traditional" 1950s family, the father worked, and the mother stayed at home raising the children. In this photograph, the mother looks happy with her role as wife and mother. But not all women found full-time homemaking an ideal way of life.

The first Levittown homes were just 800 square feet in size, but they came with an expandable attic. Buyers could choose from five models that differed in color, roofline, and window placement. Even the salesmen used assembly-line methods. A buyer could choose a house and sign a contract within three minutes.



### 41.5 Population Shifts to Suburbs and Sunbelt States

In 1941, Bill and Alfred Levitt won a government contract to build thousands of homes for war workers in Norfolk, Virginia. At first, everything went wrong. Skilled workers were in short supply. The schedule was too tight. It looked like they would miss their deadlines and lose money. The Levitts decided to rethink how they built homes. They broke the construction process into 27 steps. Then they hired and trained 27 teams of workers, each of which specialized in just one step. By the time the project ended, they had revolutionized the process of building homes.

**Middle-Class Families Move to the Suburbs** No industry had suffered more during the Depression and war years than the homebuilding industry. Housing starts had dropped from more than 1 million new homes a year to fewer than 100,000. By war's end, housing was in such short supply that 250 used trolley cars were sold as homes in Chicago. Returning veterans were eager to buy homes and start families. The GI Bill was ready to assist them with home loans at low interest rates. But there were few homes to buy.

The Levitt brothers knew exactly how to help those veterans use those loans. In 1947, they began work on *Levittown*, the first planned community in the nation. It was located on Long Island, about 20 miles from New York City. By 1951, the brothers had built 17,447 homes around Levittown. They would go on to build two more Levittowns, in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, by 1960.

To keep costs down, the Levitts built small, boxy, almost identical homes with two bedrooms and one bathroom. Different work crews moved from house to house doing only one job. There were tile crews and floor crews. One team specialized in white paint while another one only applied red paint. By mass-producing their homes in this way, the Levitts greatly sped up production. By 1948, the Levitts were building 36 houses a day. They also kept their prices under \$8,000.

The first Levittown in New York was a kind of suburb called a bedroom community. Most people who lived there commuted by car or public transportation to jobs in New York City. Although a commute could be tiring, countless young families jumped at the chance to live in a clean, safe, child-friendly suburb. Between 1950 and 1956, the number of Americans living in suburban communities increased by 46 percent.

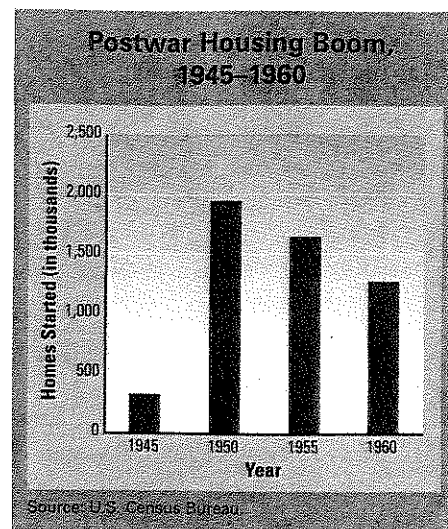
As a group, these new suburbanites were overwhelmingly white and middle class. Many suburbs, including Levittown, did not sell to African Americans. Indeed, this homogeneity was part of the appeal of suburbs. "Everybody lives on the same side of the tracks," observed the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1954. "They have no slums to fret about, no families of conspicuous wealth to envy, no traditional upper crust to whet and thwart their social aspirations [ambitions]."

**Weather and Wages Spur Migration to the Sunbelt** Americans were not only on the move from cities to suburbs. They were also moving from the northern half of the country to the Sunbelt. This "belt" of warm-weather states stretched across the southern third of the United States from Florida to California.

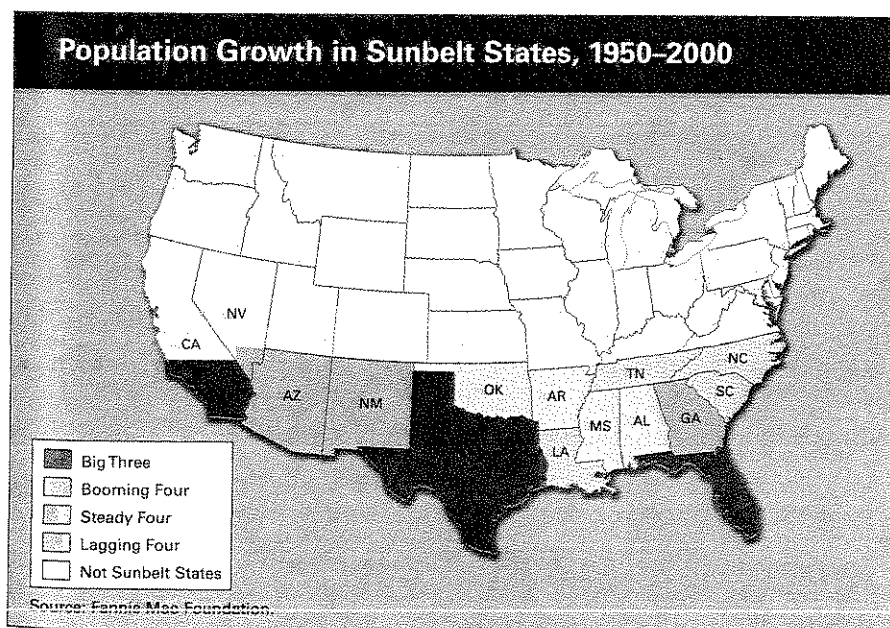
After World War II, manufacturers and other businesses began locating in the Sunbelt. They were attracted by low labor costs. In addition, unions were less entrenched in the Sunbelt states than in the older industrial regions of the North. The Sunbelt tourist industry also grew, as families flocked to sunny beaches and new attractions like Disneyland.

As businesses moved south, people followed. California felt the effects of this migration as much as any state. Between 1950 and 1960, California's population grew by 50 percent, from about 10.6 million to more than 15.7 million people. Other Sunbelt states experienced similar growth.

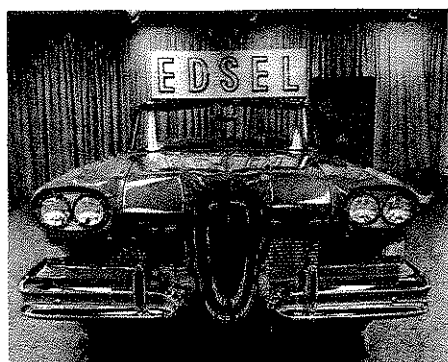
Two advances in technology made this large population shift possible. The first was the design and construction of massive water projects in the arid Southwest. These projects involved building dams on major rivers to capture precious water in huge reservoirs. This water was then distributed through a system of canals and aqueducts to fast-growing cities such as Phoenix, Arizona; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Los Angeles, California. The second key technology was the development of room air conditioners designed for home use. Air conditioning made summers bearable in Sunbelt states like Florida and Arizona. Annual sales of room air conditioners jumped from around 30,000 in 1946 to more than a million by 1953.



The rapid growth in housing starts was made possible by a revolution in home construction techniques. Using assembly-line methods pioneered by Henry Ford, homebuilders like the Levitt brothers were able to mass-produce homes at an astonishing rate.



Not all Sunbelt states grew at the same rate. Each of the Big Three grew by more than 13 million people between 1950 and 2000. The Booming Four also showed large gains. The Steady Four grew at about the same rate as the rest of the country. The Lagging Four grew only half as fast as the nation as a whole.



Named after Henry Ford's only child, the Edsel failed to sell well. Only 181,000 Edsels were produced over three years. Today, the Edsel is considered a "poor man's collectors car." As Edsel historian Phil Skinner explains, "There are a lot more Edsels out there than people who love them."

## 41.6 The Triumph of the Automobile

On September 4, 1957, a new car called the Edsel appeared in Ford showrooms around the country. At first, consumers showed up at the dealerships in record numbers. Ford executives were thrilled. But then they realized people were looking, not buying. And most people did not like what they saw. The Edsel had been designed to be the biggest, flashiest, most luxurious Ford ever. Public response, however, was not enthusiastic. "One member of the media called it 'an Oldsmobile sucking a lemon,'" recalls a rare Edsel owner, "and another called it 'a Pontiac pushing a toilet seat.'" After three years of poor sales, Ford gave up on the Edsel. But such failures were rare in the 1950s. For most of the decade, automobile sales stayed strong as the growth of suburbs increased the demand for cars.

**The Middle-Class Dream: Two Cars in Every Garage** Life in the suburbs depended on access to an automobile. Because most suburbs lacked public transportation, fathers commuted by car to their jobs in nearby cities. Mothers needed cars to drive to supermarkets and suburban shopping centers. After school, children depended on the family car to get to their music lessons or little league games. Suburban families began to find they needed not just one, but two cars in their garage.

Yet cars were more than a necessity in this booming consumer culture. They became a **status symbol**, or sign of wealth and prestige. Automakers encouraged car owners to trade in last year's models for new ones to keep up with their neighbors. Buyers were also urged to "move up" to ever-more-expensive cars to show that they had become a success in life. The Edsel was introduced as "the smart car for the young executive or professional family on the way up." A 1958 ad proclaimed, "They'll know you've *arrived* when you drive up in an Edsel." That same year an Oldsmobile ad gushed,

Obviously this is a car to attract attention. Its precedent-breaking beauty fully deserves all the applause owners are giving it. Men and women who have just recently moved up to a '58 Oldsmobile from another make are the loudest in their praise . . . proudest of their new possessions.

### How Did Automakers Persuade Americans to Buy a New Car Every Year?

For many Americans in the 1950s, buying a new car was a yearly ritual. Automakers encouraged this practice in two ways. First, each year, they made changes to the style, so that each year's models looked different from those of the year before. Second, they introduced new features every year, designed to make driving more pleasurable. The combined effect was to make last year's car look and feel old long before its useful lifetime was over.

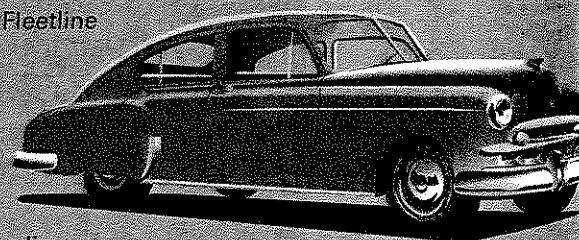
**Model:** 1949 Chevrolet Fleetline

**Style:** 2-door sedan

**Base price:** \$1,492

**New standard features:** starter button, 2-speed heater

**New options:** white sidewall tires, AM-FM radio



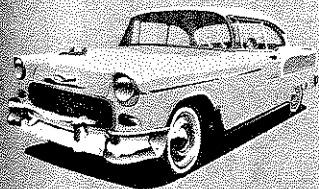
Throughout the 1950s, car sales stayed mostly above 7 million a year. By 1958, more than 67 million cars were on the road. Close to 12 million families owned two or more cars. Two years later, the census reported that 65 percent of all working people drove cars to work.

**Roads to Everywhere: The Interstate Highway System** As the majority of Americans came to depend on cars for transportation, they demanded more and better roads. State and federal lawmakers responded by funding new highway construction programs. The most ambitious was a program authorized by Congress in 1956 to construct a nationwide interstate highway system. The goal of this system was to connect major cities around the country by a network of super highways.

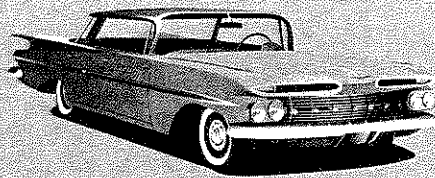
President Eisenhower strongly supported federal funding of the interstate highway system. He remembered how useful the four-lane *autobahns*, or high-speed highways built by Germany in the 1930s, had been for moving troops during World War II. With the United States engaged in the Cold War, a system of superhighways was seen as an important aid to the nation's defense. Both troops and weapons could be transported easily and quickly with such a network of high-speed highways in place.

By 1960, about 10,000 miles of interstate highway had been constructed. Today, the system has about 45,000 miles of highway, all built to the same high standards. Interstate highways are divided, with at least two lanes in either direction. Access is controlled by the use of on-ramps and off-ramps. The flow of traffic is not interrupted by traffic lights or railroad crossings. Curves are engineered to be safe at high speeds. Rest areas are spaced along the way for the comfort of travelers.

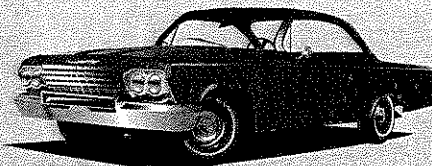
The interstate highway system benefited the country in many ways. It made travel by road over long distances both faster and safer. It created economic opportunities as new roadside businesses, such as gas stations, motels, and restaurants, sprang up at interstate exits. By improving access to all parts of the country, the system gave people more choices as to where to live, work, shop, and vacation. For better or worse, the highways also increased Americans' dependence on cars and trucks as their main form of transportation.



**Model:** 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air  
**Style:** 4-door sedan  
**Base price:** \$1,932  
**New standard features:** electric windshield wipers, back-up lights  
**New options:** electric clock, power windows and seats, spare tire on back bumper



**Model:** 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air  
**Style:** 4-door sedan  
**Base price:** \$2,440  
**New standard features:** vinyl interior  
**New options:** air conditioner, leather seats, dual exhausts, cruise control



**Model:** 1962 Chevrolet Bel Air  
**Style:** 4-door sedan  
**Base price:** \$2,510  
**New standard features:** two front-seat safety belts  
**New options:** front bucket seats, padded dash





In 1953, Dr. Jonas Salk, shown here on the left, announced the development of a trial polio vaccine. Among the first to test it were his wife and sons. Later trials found the vaccine safe and effective. Salk received many honors for his work in wiping out polio. He refused cash awards, however, and continued working to improve the vaccine.

## 41.7 Technological Advances Transform Everyday Life

In 1953, Charles Mee was a 14-year-old high school football player in Barrington, Illinois. One summer night, on the way to a dance, Mee fell ill. He was dizzy, unsteady on his feet, and chilled. Later that night, he could not stand up. His parents drove him to the nearest hospital. The head nurse took one look at Mee and pronounced, "This boy has polio." Mee knew that his life was changed forever.

**Advances in Medicine Extend Life Expectancy** It would have been small comfort to Mee to know that he was not alone. Polio, or infantile paralysis, was one of the most feared diseases of the 20th century. The first polio epidemic in the United States, in 1916, left 27,000 people paralyzed and 9,000 dead. Over the next 40 years, polio epidemics struck every summer across the country. The worst year was 1952, when almost 60,000 new polio cases were reported.

President Franklin Roosevelt was perhaps the most famous victim of polio. In 1938, he established the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to seek a cure for polio. Over the next 17 years, the foundation funded research to create a vaccine against polio. That research led to the development of the first **polio vaccine** by Dr. Jonas Salk. The vaccine was made up of very small parts of the polio virus. People who took the vaccine developed antibodies that protected them from infection by the actual polio virus. In 1954, some 2 million schoolchildren took part in trials of the vaccine. Statistics showed the vaccine to be as much as 90 percent effective in preventing polio. A dreaded disease had finally been conquered.

Surgical techniques advanced rapidly in the 1950s as well. The first open-heart surgery and the first kidney transplant were performed. The first pacemaker, a device designed to regulate the beating of a patient's heart, was developed. Medical researchers also began to experiment with heart transplants.

A number of diseases once viewed as killers were routinely cured in the 1950s through the use of antibiotic drugs. Penicillin, streptomycin, and other "wonder drugs" attacked bacteria that caused everything from earaches to pneumonia and tuberculosis. These advances in medicine contributed to a rise in **life expectancy** during the 1950s. A child born in 1950 could expect to live to the age of 68. By 1960, the average life expectancy had reached 69.7 years.

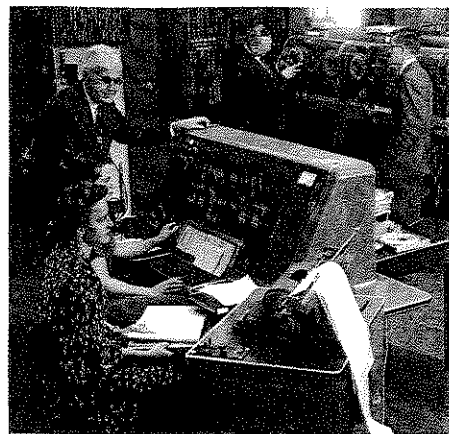
**Peaceful Uses for Nuclear Energy** During the 1950s, scientists explored peaceful uses for nuclear energy. One of the most promising was the generation of electricity. "It is not too much to expect that our children will enjoy in their homes electrical energy too cheap to meter," predicted Lewis Strauss, chair of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, in 1954. Three years later, the first full-scale nuclear power plant opened in Shippingport, Pennsylvania.

Medical researchers were also finding new uses for nuclear energy. Radioactive isotopes were used in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. The use of X-rays as a diagnostic tool became a general practice in the 1950s. At the same time, specialists in nuclear medicine began to use radioactive iodine to treat thyroid cancer.



**Computers Enter the Workplace** In 1946, two engineers from the University of Pennsylvania built one of the earliest electronic digital computers. Called ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer), it contained nearly 18,000 vacuum tubes and took up about 1,500 square feet of floor space—almost as much as two Levittown homes. It could perform 300 multiplications per second. Five years later, the same team introduced the first commercially successful computer. Called the UNIVAC, it could do more than just crunch numbers. The UNIVAC could handle letters and words. In 1952, a UNIVAC proved its power by accurately predicting the election of Eisenhower just 45 minutes after the polls closed.

The invention of the transistor in 1947 led to dramatic improvements in computer design. A transistor is a small, low-powered electronic device. By 1959, transistors had replaced the bulky and unreliable vacuum tubes. As computers shrank in size, they began to appear in more and more workplaces. The new machines revolutionized the collection and storage of data. They sped up the work of record keepers, such as librarians and tax collectors. But as the decade ended, few people could foresee a time when there would be a personal computer on almost every desk.



By today's standards, ENIAC was a 30-ton monster. But it had most of the elements of a modern computer. It could add, subtract, multiply, divide, and find square roots at amazing speeds.

## Summary

**The years following World War II were a time of prosperity in the United States. As the economy boomed, fears of a return to depression conditions faded. During the 1950s, millions of working-class families became affluent enough to move up into the middle class.**

**Fair Deal** President Harry Truman guided the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy. But he was unable to get his Fair Deal reform program approved by a Republican Congress.

**Taft-Hartley Act** Immediately after the war, a series of labor strikes threatened to cripple the economy. In response, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which limited the power of unions.

**Baby boom** As the economy improved, Americans married and had children at record rates. The result was a baby boom that lasted from 1946 to 1964.

**Levittown** Suburbs like Levittown attracted homebuyers by offering inexpensive houses on small lots. Suburban life revolved around the so-called traditional family, with a working dad and stay-at-home mom.

**Sunbelt** Besides leaving cities for suburbs, Americans were also moving from northern states to the Sunbelt. California, Texas, and Florida all grew rapidly as a result.

**Interstate highway system** A federally funded network of high-speed roads linked the nation as never before. Better roads encouraged the growth of suburbs and suburban shopping centers.

**Polio vaccine** Medical advances such as antibiotics increased life expectancy in the 1950s. But no advance was more welcomed than the polio vaccine. This vaccine ended a decades-long battle with a much-dreaded disease that caused paralysis and death among its victims.

## Chapter 42

# Rebelling Against Conformity

*How did some Americans rebel against conformity in the 1950s?*

### 42.1 Introduction

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin grew up in Rockville Center, a suburb of New York City. On weekdays, her father put on a three-piece suit and left for work. “From the window I watched him greet the other men on our block as they walked to the corner to catch the bus for the short ride to the train station.” On summer weekends, “he and almost all the fathers could be found outside in their shirtsleeves mowing the small patches of grass, rooting out the occasional weed, planting flowers along the margins of the driveways.”

Like most women in Rockville Center, Goodwin’s mother was a full-time homemaker. “She never wore shorts or even slacks,” Goodwin later recalled. In the grip of the worst heat waves, she wore a girdle, a full slip, and a cotton or linen dress with a bib apron perpetually fixed to her shoulders. Such modesty was the norm in our neighborhood.”

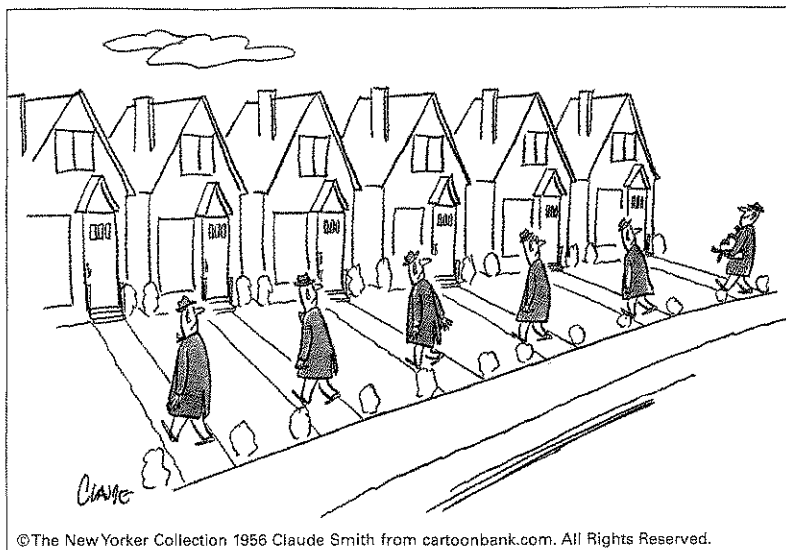
Goodwin’s childhood was carefree. When she and her friends were not in school, they rode their bicycles or roller skates around the block, played hopscotch, and set up lemonade stands in front of their homes. They considered their little street “our playground, our park, our community.”

Life in Rockville Center seemed idyllic until Goodwin became a teenager. Then, like other teens in the 1950s, she began listening to the radio to a new kind of loud, fast music called **rock ‘n’ roll**. She read novels about romantic misfits. She went to movies that featured rebellious youth. She discovered that beyond her suburb lay a universe rather different from the safe and predictable world she had grown up in. Goodwin began to question the expectation in her social world that she should think and behave like everyone else.

The 1950s are widely viewed as an age of **conformity**—a time when everyone behaved and thought in socially expected ways. But for Doris Kearns Goodwin and many other young people coming of age in these years, it was so a time of rebellion against those same expectations.



In the 1950s, rebellious teens were looking for a new kind of movie hero. They found one in Marlon Brando. Brando’s role in *The Wild One*, a controversial 1953 film about motorcycle gangs, established him as a symbol of youthful rebellion against authority.



©The New Yorker Collection 1956 Claude Smith from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

This cartoon pokes gentle fun at conformity in suburbia. The identical husbands going home to their identical houses look upset by the man carrying a gift. Perhaps they are wondering if they should be bringing home gifts as well, if only to be keeping up with their neighbors.

## 42.2 The Culture and Critics of Suburbia

During the 1950s, novelist and poet John Updike gained fame writing about life in suburbia—a term used to describe the nation's suburbs and the people who lived there. In one poem, he wrote,

I drive my car to supermarket  
The way I take is superhigh,  
A superlot is where I park it,  
And Super Suds are what I buy.

Supersalesmen sell me tonic—  
Super-Tone-O for Relief.  
The planes I ride are supersonic.  
In trains, I like the Super Chief.

—*Superman*, 1954

Updike's mocking of the "super" suburbs did not discourage families from moving there. During the 1950s, suburbs grew twice as fast as the nation as a whole. By 1960, a third of all Americans were living in suburbia.

**Critics Condemn Life in the Suburbs** Not everyone viewed this enormous population shift with enthusiasm. Critics saw suburbia as a wasteland of conformity and **materialism**, or preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth. In their eyes, little good could be said about the suburbs or the people who lived in them.

When social critic Lewis Mumford looked at a suburb, he saw only bland people in bland housing leading bland lives. He described the first Levittown built on Long Island, New York, as

a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.

—*The City in History*, 1961

In an influential book called *The Organization Man*, sociologist William Whyte offered a different view of suburbs. He saw them as "packaged villages that have become the dormitory of a new generation of organization men." These "organization men" were employees of large corporations or government bureaucracies. Whyte wrote of them,

They are not the workers . . . in the usual . . . sense of the word. These people not only work for the Organization. The ones I am talking about belong to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life.

—*The Organization Man*, 1956

Whyte argued that these workers had given up their individual personalities and desires to conform to the demands of the organizations they worked for.

Sociologist David Riesman attacked suburbs for creating a culture of conformity. In his book *The Lonely Crowd*, he wrote that a middle-class suburban child “learns to conform to the group almost as soon as he learns anything.” Such children grow up valuing “fitting in” with their peers far above thinking for themselves or striving for individual achievement.

Few aspects of middle-class life drew more criticism than television. In the early 1950s, television brought **high culture**—works of art, such as plays and concerts, that are held in high esteem—into U.S. homes. By 1960, however, most shows were popular entertainment. Critics were dismayed by much of what they saw on the “idiot box.” They also worried about its isolating effects. Poet T. S. Eliot dismissed television as a “medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.”

**In Defense of Suburbia** To many Americans, these attacks on suburban life seemed unfair. Where critics saw only conformity, people who actually lived in suburbs were often struck by their diversity. Although most suburbs excluded African Americans, they often had a broad mixture of religious and ethnic groups. A resident of Levittown, Pennsylvania, recalled, “From the beginning there has been this unusual mix of liberal and conservative, Bronx-born Jew and Nanticoke coal cracker.”

Many also objected to the view of suburbia as a wasteland of boring, look-alike boxes. As Doris Kearns Goodwin recalled,

For my parents . . . as for the other families on the block, the house on Southard Avenue was the realization of a dream . . . Here they would have a single-family home, a private world for themselves and their children, which they could make their own—furnish, repair, remodel—something which only a few years before had seemed the prerogative [privilege] of the impossibly affluent.

— *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir*, 1997

“Postwar Americans were not more materialistic than earlier generations,” agrees historian James Patterson, “just incomparably richer. They were able to buy and enjoy things that their parents could only dream about.”

Malvina Reynolds sang a song called “Little Boxes” to describe America’s new suburbs. The song warned that identical houses created identical people. Many suburbs began with nearly identical homes. Over time, however, many people individualized their tract homes.





Beatniks placed a high value on self-expression. They frequently held events at coffeehouses in cities such as San Francisco and New York City. While spectators sipped European-style coffee and listened, beat writers read their latest works and jazz musicians added free-flowing riffs.



Beat novelist Jack Kerouac wrote in a style called stream of consciousness. He taped together 12-foot rolls of paper like this one, slid them into a typewriter, and wrote whatever came to mind, hardly ever stopping. It took him only 20 days to write *On the Road*, the most famous beat literary work.

### 42.3 Currents of Nonconformity

Beneath the surface of widespread conformity, there were many currents of **nonconformity**, or rebellion against conventional behavior, in the 1950s. No one knew this better than the writer Jack Kerouac. Kerouac embodied the era's nonconformist streak. Kerouac wrote that he lived in

a world full of rucksack wanderers . . . refusing to . . . work for the privilege of consuming, all that [stuff] they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, . . . thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad . . . [who] by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.

—*The Dharma Bums*, 1958

**Beats Defy Convention in Poetry and Literature** Kerouac was part of a group of writers and poets who created the **beat movement**. The term “beat” had a double meaning. It could mean beaten down, but it was also short for “beatific,” or blissfully happy. The beat movement began in New York City's Greenwich Village and then spread from there to San Francisco. Herb Caen, a San Francisco newspaper columnist, called members of the movement **beatniks**, and the name stuck.

Beatniks rejected all forms of **convention**, or customary ways of living. They shunned traditional nine-to-five jobs and the materialism of American life. In contrast to clean-cut suburbanites, many beats wore beards, berets, and dark clothes. They turned away from conventional Western faiths to study Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. They grooved on African American music, especially a new form of jazz called bebop.

Beat writers made significant contributions to American literature. Their subject matter consisted primarily of their own feelings and adventures. They often used **stream of consciousness**, a writing technique in which thoughts are presented randomly, as if flowing directly from a character's mind. Their vivid, image-filled sentences could go on for pages without stopping. The first period in Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, for instance, does not appear until line 221.

While many literary critics praised beat writings, more conventional readers were sometimes offended by it. In 1957, police raided a San Francisco bookstore on the grounds that *Howl* was **obscene**, or morally offensive. After reading the poem, the judge in the case ruled otherwise, saying,

The first part of “Howl” presents a picture of a nightmare world; the second part is an indictment of those elements of modern society destructive to the best qualities of human nature . . . materialism, conformity, and mechanization leading toward war . . . It ends in a plea for holy living.

—Superior Court Judge Clayton Horn, 1957

**Rebellious Teens Create a Youth Culture** Teenagers growing up in the 1950s created another current of nonconformity: a new **youth culture**. Teens rebelled against the world of their parents in the music they listened to, the dances they



danced, the movies they watched, and the slang they used. Two factors supported the growth of this youth culture. One was the sheer number of baby boomers entering adolescence. By 1956, there were 13 million teenagers in the United States. The other was affluence. With cash earned from part-time jobs and allowances, teenagers had more money to spend than ever before.

The most enduring element of this new youth culture was a new style of music that drove many parents crazy. A Cleveland, Ohio, disc jockey named Alan Freed popularized this new sound. After hearing from a record store-owner that white teenagers were buying records by black rhythm and blues artists, Freed began to play black music on his popular radio show. Unlike traditional blues music, rhythm and blues uses amplified instruments, such as electric guitar. Before long, white musicians began blending rhythm and blues with country music and popular songs. The confluence of these musical styles resulted in a brash new sound called rock 'n' roll.

At one time, parents might have stopped their children from hearing this new sound by controlling the family radio and record collection. Technology, however, made that impossible. With the use of transistors in the 1950s, radios and record players became so cheap that teenagers could afford to buy their own. Despite, or perhaps in part because of, their parent's objections, young people embraced rock 'n' roll as the sound of their generation.

The most popular early rock 'n' roll performer was a young singer from Memphis, Tennessee, named Elvis Presley. White teenagers loved his distinctive sound and visual appearance. At a time when most teenage boys sported trim crew cuts, Presley wore his hair slicked back with long sideburns. He wiggled his hips in a sexually suggestive way, while his upper lip curled in defiant sneer. Adults ridiculed him as "Elvis the Pelvis." But to teenagers, Presley represented a rebellion against the music and manners of their elders.

Teenagers often gathered at "sock hops" to dance to the latest hit records. Held in school gyms where street shoes were not allowed, sock hops were a place where teenagers could learn dances their parents had never heard of. Examples included the hand jive, the stroll, and the bop.

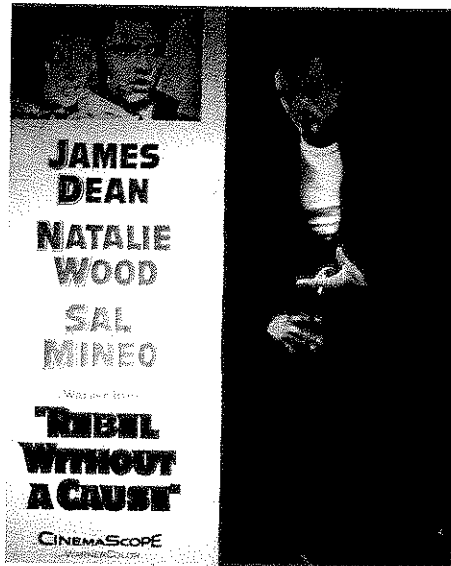
Hollywood catered to restless teenagers by creating movies featuring moody young people who were misunderstood by adults. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean played an intense, brooding young misfit. *The Wild One* featured Marlon Brando as a rebellious motorcycle gang leader. When a girl in the film asked what he was rebelling against, his answer was, "Whaddya got?"

Teenagers also developed their own language so that "big daddies" (older people) would not understand them. "Boss" meant great. "Threads" were clothes. A person who was "radioactive" was very popular. Phrases like "I'm cloud nine," "cool it," and "don't have a cow" all started as 1950s' slang.

**Comic Books Deviate from "the American Way"** Comic book artists in the 1950s also broke with convention. Comic books had been around since the 1930s. Their heroes tended to be wholesome crime-fighters like Superman, who famously fought for "truth, justice, and the American way." But in the 1950s, some comics veered into darker subject matter. New series like *Crime Suspense Stories*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Frontline Combat* were notable for

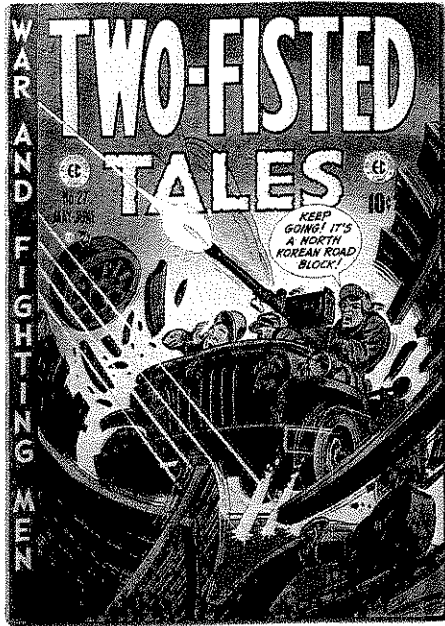


Rock 'n' roll singer Elvis Presley was idolized by teens in the 1950s. He blended African American rhythm and blues with white country music and gospel to create a new sound. Although tame by today's standards, Presley's sexually suggestive dancing offended many adults.



To reach young audiences, Hollywood made films featuring angry young men misunderstood by adults. Actor James Dean embodied youthful rebellion. When he died in a car crash in 1955, many teenagers mourned his passing.





*Two-Fisted Tales* was one of a new breed of gory, graphic comic books that appeared in the early 1950s. Many adults feared the subject matter of these comics would corrupt the minds and morals of young readers.

their gruesome covers and violent storylines. A new comic called *Mad* poked fun at just about everything, from other comic books to popular television shows to foreign policy and espionage.

Many parents were horrified by the new comics. Their concerns were given voice by psychologist Fredric Wertham in a 1954 book called *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham complained that values such as “trust, loyalty, confidence, solidarity, sympathy, charity, [and] compassion are ridiculed” in comic books. He also argued that comics had become how-to books for future criminals. “If one were to set out to show children how to steal, rob, lie, cheat, assault, and break into houses, no better method could be devised,” he wrote.

In response to the fears raised by Wertham’s book, comic book publishers created the Comics Code Authority. This organization screened comics to make sure they complied with its Comic Code. The code prohibited depictions of gore, sexuality, and excessive violence. It also required that good must always win over evil. To escape the restrictions of the code, the creators of *Mad* converted their comic book into a magazine in 1955.

**Artists Rebel with Paint** In the art world, rebellion against convention took other forms. Like beat writers, some painters were creating art that was vivid, unstructured, and not bound by any rules. Although their individual styles were very different, these painters formed a school of art known as **abstract expressionism**. The art was abstract because it seldom depicted recognizable objects.



This photograph shows Jackson Pollock at work. He and other painters of the 1950s worked quickly and impulsively to create abstract art that said more about their emotions than their thoughts.

It was expressionistic because for both the artist and the viewer, an emotional response was more important than intellectual appreciation.

Abstract expressionists rebelled against highly realistic styles of painting. They drew much of their inspiration from psychology, believing that art could go beyond rational thought to reach deeper emotional truths. "The source of my painting is the unconscious," said Jackson Pollock, the most famous abstract expressionist. "I am not much aware of what is taking place; it is only after that I see what I have done."

Pollock developed a technique sometimes called "action painting." He placed a blank canvas on the floor and dripped paint onto it from above. Pollock said of this method, "I can walk around it, work from the four sides, and literally be in the painting."

Abstract expressionist works could perplex viewers. The paintings often had no coherent theme or central subject to focus on. Some paintings were so cluttered and detailed it was hard to make out what was in them. Others were so spare and simple that it seemed a child could have painted them. Nonetheless, abstract expressionism quickly gained acceptance from art lovers. Despite being dismissed as "Jack the Dripper," Pollock lived to see his paintings displayed in art museums. In 2004, a Pollock painting sold for a staggering \$11.6 million.

## Summary

**The 1950s were widely viewed as an age of conformity. Some social critics worried that the suburbs had become wastelands of cultural conformity and materialism. However, many currents of nonconformity also swirled through this decade.**

**Suburbia** Millions of Americans moved to suburbs during the 1950s. Critics like Lewis Mumford predicted that the sameness of suburban homes would lead to a social uniformity. But for many families, a move to the suburbs was the fulfillment of the American dream.

**The Organization Man** Sociologists William Whyte and David Riesman explored conformity in their widely read books. They argued that large corporations, suburbs, television, and peer pressure were robbing Americans of their individuality.

**Beat movement** A group of nonconformists called beats rejected all forms of convention. Beatniks rejected all forms of traditional society. Beat writers made major contributions to American literature.

**Youth culture** Teenagers created their own culture of nonconformity by embracing comic books, movies, music, and slang that annoyed or appalled their parents.

**Rock 'n' roll** This now-familiar form of music was born in the 1950s. It was rooted in African American rhythm and blues and featured simple melodies, basic chords, and a strong, danceable beat. Many parents hated rock 'n' roll, which made it even more attractive to teenagers.

**Abstract expressionism** Painters like Jackson Pollock broke with realism in art to create a new form known as abstract expressionism. Abstract expressionist paintings appealed to viewers' emotions rather than their rational thought.

## Chapter 43

# Two Americas

*Why did poverty persist in the United States in an age of affluence?*

### 43.1 Introduction

In September 1956, Vice President Richard Nixon gave a speech in which he predicted a prosperous next few years for the United States. In the “not too distant” future, he said, a four-day workweek would become the norm. The “remaining pockets of [economic] distress” would be wiped out. “These are not dreams or idle boasts,” he stated confidently. “Our hope is to double everyone’s standard of living in ten years.”

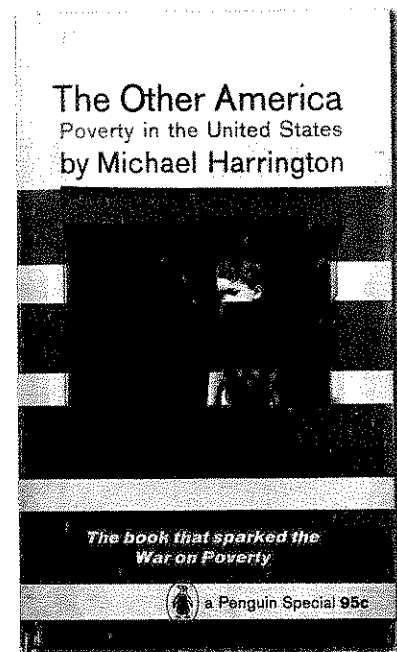
Nixon was not alone in his optimism. Booming economic growth since World War II had led many government officials and leading intellectuals to believe that poverty would soon be eradicated. Although some voiced concern that not all Americans shared in the general prosperity, most of the public ignored the existence of poverty in the United States. *Time* magazine went so far as to forecast “the elimination of poverty as a fact of human life.”

In 1962, a new book called *The Other America* jolted the nation out of its complacency. Written by social activist Michael Harrington, the book described two Americas—one affluent, the other impoverished:

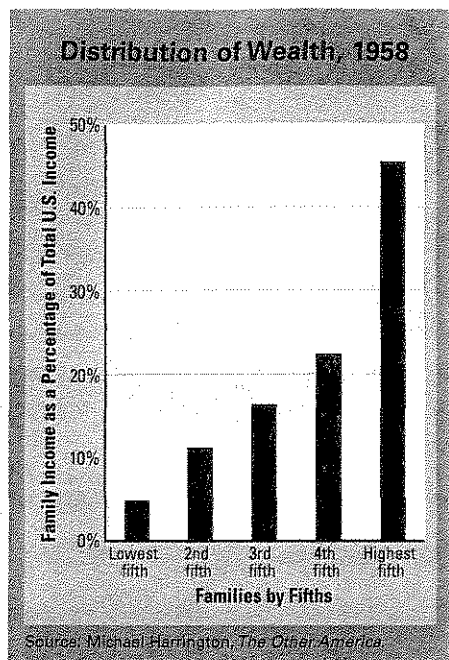
There is a familiar America. It is celebrated in speeches and advertised on television and in the magazines. It has the highest mass standard of living the world has ever known. In the 1950s . . . the familiar America began to call itself “the affluent society” . . . [Meanwhile] there existed another America. In it dwelt somewhere between 40,000,000 and 50,000,000 citizens of this land. They were poor. They still are.

—Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, 1962

Harrington’s book shocked readers with the details of what he called the “enormous and intolerable fact of poverty in America.” It was a wake-up call for the American people. *The Other America* generated a national discussion about the responsibility of government to address gross inequalities in American society.



Michael Harrington was a social and political activist who became best known for writing *The Other America*. This book stunned readers with its portrayal of poverty in the midst of American affluence. It helped inspire a government antipoverty program—called the War on Poverty—in the 1960s.



During the 1950s, the United States prospered, but all Americans did not benefit. This graph shows that in 1958, the top fifth of American families received almost half of the nation's income. The bottom fifth received less than one twentieth of all income.

## 43.2 The Persistence of Poverty in an Affluent Society

Greenwood, Mississippi, was one of countless towns in which the two Americas existed side by side. During the 1950s, playwright Endesha Ida Mae Holland grew up there, raised alongside her three siblings by a hardworking single mother. Holland later wrote a memoir about her childhood in which she described the contrast between poverty and prosperity in Greenwood. The well-to-do whites, she wrote, lived on quiet, shady boulevards in houses "with many big rooms and bright, soft rugs on the floors." Each house had a neatly trimmed lawn, "with pretty flowers set in borders along the walkway." In these neighborhoods, "the streets were paved and no open window was without its screen."

Holland herself lived in the "respectable" black section of town. Her home was a small, ramshackle house infested with cockroaches. The roof leaked, the walls were plastered with newspaper, and the packed earth showed through between the floorboards. Holland was poor, but others were poorer. She wrote that "the poorest black people lived" near the railroad tracks, where "in places the tracks were almost hidden by the smelly black mud that oozed from the 'bayou,' an open cesspool that held the waste from outhouses."

**Different Ways of Defining Poverty** Most people understand poverty as the lack of means—money, material goods, or other resources—to live decently. But what does it mean to live decently? There has never been a single standard for measuring economic deprivation. What people think of as poor depends on where and when they live.

For much of U.S. history, many Americans felt poverty to be as much a moral condition as an economic problem. They looked down on people, known as paupers, who did not work and who lived on public charity. Many viewed **pauperism**, or dependency on public assistance, as a moral failing. "Pauperism is the consequence of willful error," wrote a leading clergyman in 1834, "of shameful indolence [laziness], of vicious habit."

At the same time, society recognized that poverty could result from misfortune. People who could not work—such as the elderly, the disabled, and children—could not help being poor. Many Americans also realized that most poor people did work, but their wages were too low to lift them out of poverty. Known today as the **working poor**, these Americans were once referred to as "the poorer sort." Although the working poor hold a more respectable place in society than did paupers, economically, there is little difference between the two.

In the late 1800s, social scientists began examining poverty more objectively, viewing it in economic rather than moral terms. For the first time, they defined poverty as a lack of income. They used the term **poverty line** to refer to the minimum amount of income one would need to meet basic needs. However, scholars disagreed about exactly where to draw the poverty line.

In 1949, the Subcommittee on Low-Income Families proposed a poverty line of \$2,000 per year for families of all sizes. This unofficial line was widely used until 1958, when the government began to adjust the amount based on family size. An official poverty line was not established until 1965. It was determined by calculating a minimal family food budget and then tripling that figure, because food typically made up about one third of a family's total budget.

**The Poor in Postwar America: An Invisible Class** By the end of the 1950s, about one in four Americans lived below the poverty line. According to *The Other America*, this meant that about 50 million people existed “at levels beneath those necessary for human decency.” Middle-class readers of Michael Harrington’s book were shocked to discover the extent of the country’s poverty. How could they not have noticed such widespread misery? They had not, wrote Harrington, because

The other America, the America of poverty, is hidden . . . Its millions are socially invisible to the rest of us . . . Poverty is often off the beaten track. It always has been. The ordinary tourist never left the main highway . . . The traveler comes to the Appalachians in the lovely season. He sees the hills, the streams, the foliage—but not the poor.

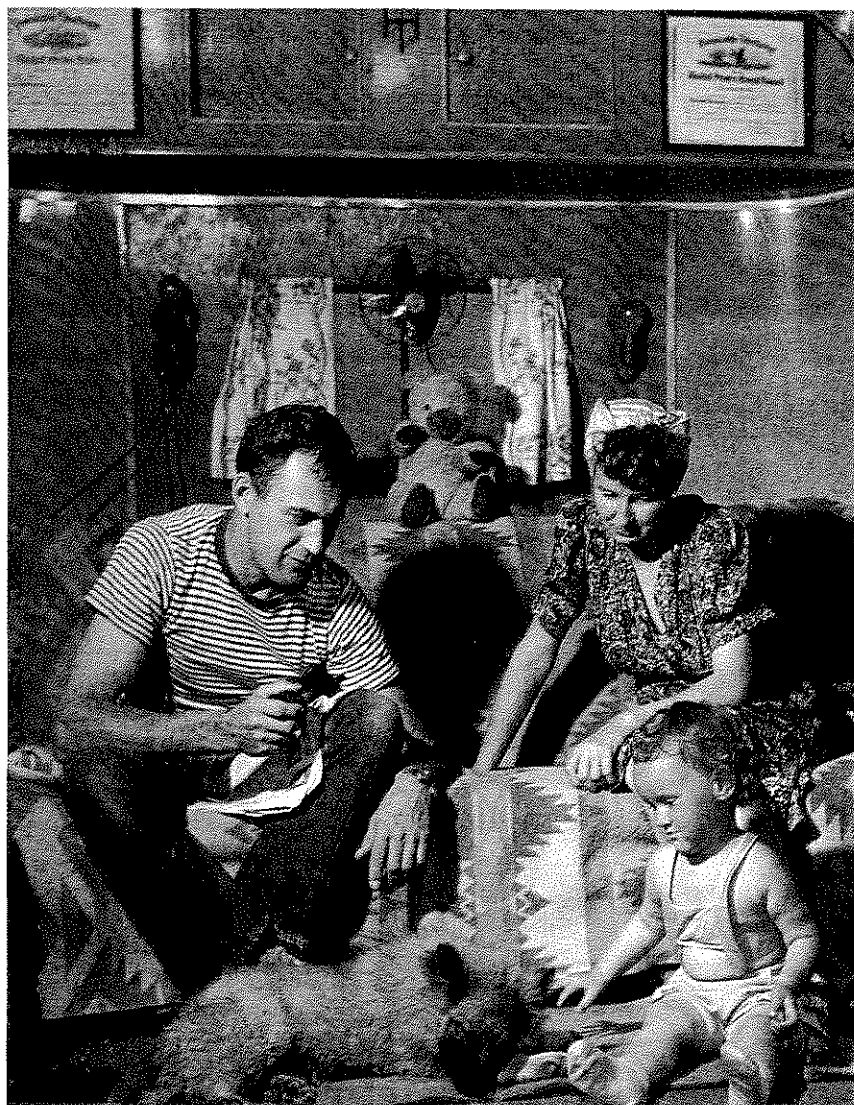
—Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, 1962

Michael Harrington argued that “poverty is invisible.” The growing availability of cheap clothing and consumer goods helped create this impression. A family with a television or a car might not appear poor. But a closer look might show telltale signs of poverty, such as poor health, a rundown home, and a decaying neighborhood.

Harrington contended that the movement of middle-class families to the suburbs after World War II was one reason for the general lack of knowledge about America’s poor. Middle-class workers commuting to urban business districts seldom encountered the poor people left behind in old city neighborhoods. “Living out in the suburbs,” Harrington wrote, “it is easy to assume that ours is, indeed, an affluent society.” The availability of inexpensive clothing also helped hide the poor from view. He observed that “America has the best-dressed poverty the world has ever known.”

Age was another factor that made the poor hard to see. “A good number of them (over 8,000,000) are sixty-five years of age or better; an even larger number are under eighteen,” Harrington noted. Elderly poor people seldom strayed from their rented rooms or homes in older urban neighborhoods. “One of the worst aspects of poverty among the aged,” Harrington wrote, “is that these people are out of sight and out of mind, and alone. The young are somewhat more visible, yet they too stay close to their neighborhoods.”

In addition, the poor wielded no political power. This made it easy for others to ignore them. “The people of the other America do not, by far and large, belong to unions, to fraternal organizations,” Harrington wrote, “or to political parties. They are without lobbies of their own; they put forward no legislative program.” Without a political voice, the poor went unheard.





### 43.3 The Landscape of Poverty in a "Land of Plenty"

The "other America," the land of the poor, had no geographic or cultural boundaries. It reached into cities and rural areas in every state. Its "inhabitants" belonged to every racial, ethnic, and age group in the country. In 1959, more than one fourth of the nation's poor were children, and one third were elderly. In a decade marked by prosperity, how did so many get left behind?

**Left Behind in the Inner Cities** As middle-class whites moved out of cities in the 1950s, poor people moved in. From 1945 to 1960, about 5 million African Americans left the South for northern cities. By 1955, nearly 700,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland, mostly to New York City. In the West, large numbers of Mexican immigrants moved to Los Angeles and other cities.

Many of the new arrivals came in search of manufacturing jobs. However, as industries relocated to the suburbs, the jobs disappeared. Housing discrimination limited where minorities could live and work. "When I went . . . to look for apartments," a Puerto Rican in Philadelphia recalled, "they throw the door in my face. They don't want no colored people, you know, my skin is dark." Black and Latino populations became concentrated in decaying, inner-city areas that were being abandoned by whites. These blighted neighborhoods turned into overcrowded slums with high rates of poverty and unemployment.

To rectify this problem, Congress passed the **Housing Act of 1949**. Its goal was to provide "a decent home . . . for every American family" by funding public housing and **urban renewal** programs. Under urban renewal, the government demolished many slums and replaced them with high-rise apartments, offices, and civic buildings. Despite its lofty-sounding goal, however, the Housing Act of 1949 made urban poverty worse. Hundreds of thousands of poor people lost homes when their neighborhoods were bulldozed. The government intended low-income public housing projects to provide an alternative, but not enough housing was built to accommodate all the displaced households. In many cities, the overcrowded and impoverished "projects" became the new slums.

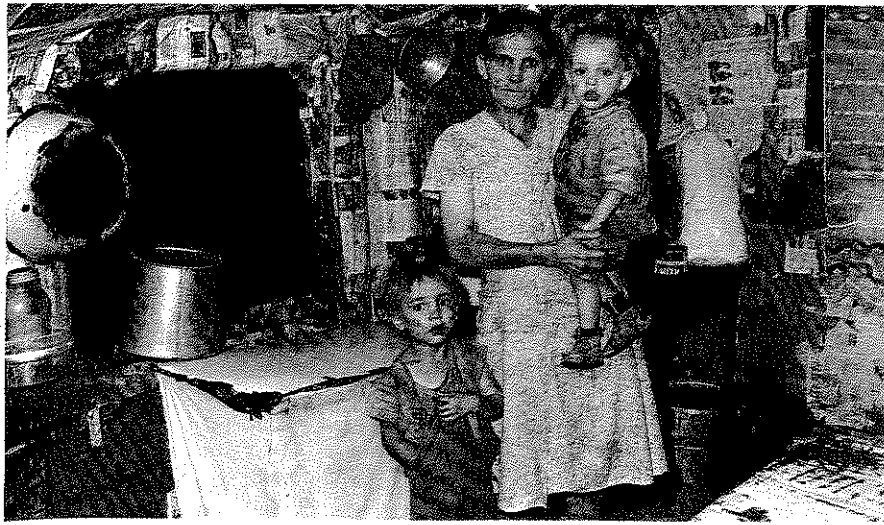
**Trying to Live Off the Land** American farmers also faced poverty. After World War II, new agricultural technology contributed to the growth of **agribusiness**—the industry of food production by large corporations or wealthy individuals. Agribusiness holdings were vast in size and produced huge quantities of food very efficiently by applying industrial production techniques to farming. Agribusiness was profitable, but its earnings accumulated at the expense of the rural poor. Small farmers could not compete with the giant corporate farms, and many sank into poverty. As a result, thousands of poor rural whites and blacks moved off the land and into cities in search of work.

On large corporate farms, migrant workers endured low pay and wretched living conditions. Many were Mexican *braceros* who came to the United States between 1942 and 1964. Other Mexicans came illegally. In 1954, the government organized Operation Wetback to expel undocumented Mexican immigrants. As a result, officials seized and deported several million Mexicans. Of the Mexican immigrants who remained in the United States in the 1950s, one in three lived below the poverty line.



Dilapidated city housing, such as this apartment building in Chicago, became the target of urban renewal programs, which aimed to clear slums and provide the poor with better housing. Many residents were forced into low-income housing projects. According to critics, this resulted in the loss of many poor but vibrant neighborhoods.





In the 1950s, Appalachia was one of the poorest regions in the country. Many of the poor were unemployed coal miners and their families. They struggled to make ends meet through subsistence farming or by working low-wage jobs. The living conditions shown here were typical of the region's severe poverty.

**Appalachia**, a mountainous region in the South, was another rural outpost of poverty. Because of the steep terrain there, living off the land by farming was difficult. Coal mining, the region's once-dominant industry, declined after World War II, as the demand for coal fell. The decrease in demand and the mechanization of mining led to job losses for miners. In the 1950s, more than 2 million impoverished people left Appalachia. Harrington described those who remained as "a beaten people, sunk in their poverty and deprived of hope."

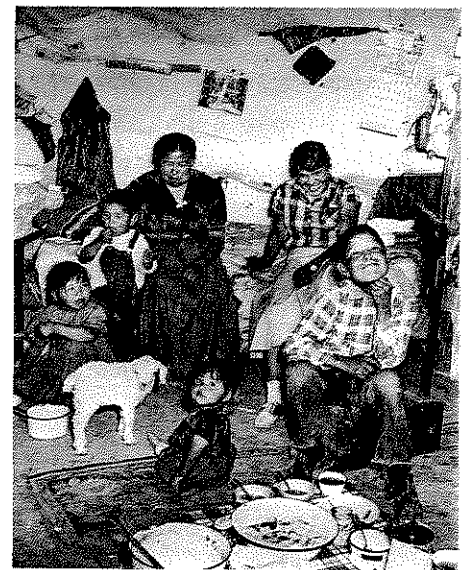
**America's Poorest Citizens** Perhaps the poorest U.S. citizens were American Indians. A 1949 study of conditions on American Indian reservations found "hopeless poverty and slum squalor." Indeed, those living on reservations seemed the most invisible poor of all, so much so that Michael Harrington omitted them—"quite wrongly" he later wrote—from *The Other America*.

In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act had affirmed American Indians' right to govern themselves. It had also affirmed their status as wards of the federal government. This meant the government held responsibility for protecting their lands and providing them with economic aid and social services.

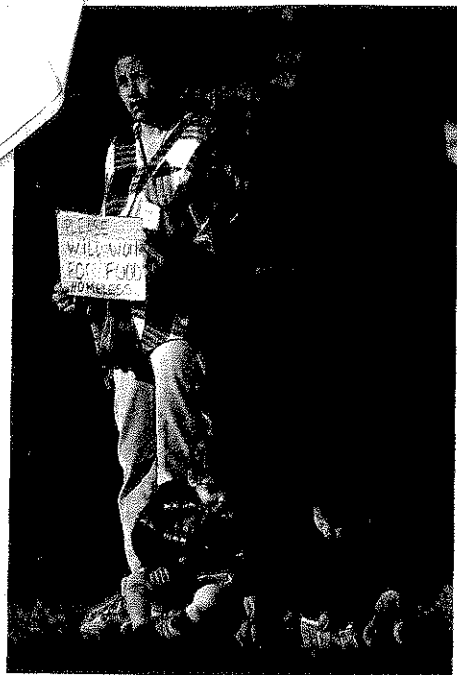
After World War II, the government wanted to end this relationship. As a practical matter, "getting out of the Indian business" would save money. Many people also thought that releasing American Indians from federal supervision would allow them to assimilate and become economically self-reliant. "Set the Indians free!" was their slogan. Others believed American Indians were not ready to be self-sufficient and would be vulnerable to exploitation. They feared that the tribes would be "freed" of the few assets—mainly land—they had left.

In 1953, Congress voted to terminate the government's responsibility for American Indians. The **termination policy** ended federal aid to tribes, withdrew federal land protection, and distributed tribal land among individuals. The **Voluntary Relocation Program** encouraged American Indians to move to cities. It provided transportation and initial help with finding housing and a job. By 1960, about 30 percent of American Indians lived in urban areas. However, many who relocated struggled to adapt to city life.

More than 100 Indian tribes and bands were eventually "terminated." Without economic aid, their poverty grew worse. Destitute tribes were forced to sell their land, resulting in the loss of more than 1 million acres of land. Termination eventually proved to be a failure, and in 1963, the policy was abandoned.



Termination agreements signed during the 1950s ended federal support for many American Indian tribes. Relocation centers were established in cities such as Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles to encourage Indians to migrate to urban areas. Many who made the move either joined the urban poor or later returned to their tribal area.



The most visible face of poverty today is homelessness. In 2007, the Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated the number of homeless people at between 444,000 and 842,000. "The driver in homelessness is the affordable housing crisis," said Nan Roman, head of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. "If we don't do something to address the crisis in affordable housing, we are not going to solve homelessness."



## Current Connections

### 43.4 The Changing Face of Poverty in America

More than 40 years have passed since *The Other America* drew attention to poverty in the United States. Despite decades of economic growth and government programs to help the poor, the "other America" has not disappeared. Over time, however, the face of poverty has changed. Today's poor are younger and more diverse than were the poor of the 1960s. Those who are homeless are also more visible and are readily seen in cities and suburbs across the country.

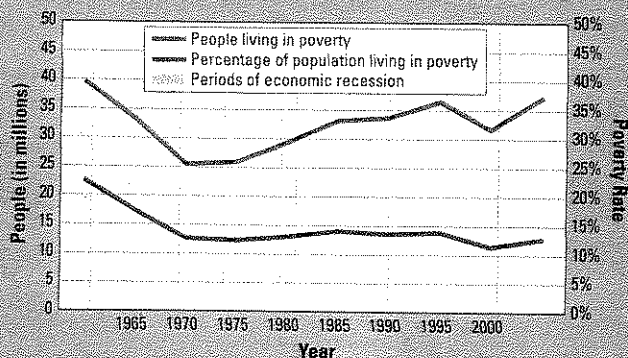
The graphs in this section show how poverty affects various U.S. populations today. But numbers alone do not answer certain age-old questions about poverty: Why are people poor? What should be done to end poverty? Who should take on the responsibility of ending it?

**Poverty by the Numbers** Since the publication of *The Other America*, the United States has made progress in reducing poverty. By 2000, the overall **poverty rate**, or percentage of people living in poverty, had decreased by almost half. But following a recession that began in 2001, the poverty rate began to inch upward again. From 2003 to 2004, the poverty rate rose from 12.5 to 12.7 percent. Two tenths of a percent may not sound like much, but that increase represents 1.1 million people who became impoverished that year. An estimated 37 million Americans lived in poverty in 2005—a figure not all that different from the number in 1960.

**Poverty by Age and Education** The age groups most likely to be poor have changed over the past half century. In 1960, at least three out of ten older Americans were poor. Thanks largely to rising Social Security payments, the poverty rate among the elderly dropped to less than one in ten by 2005. The poverty rate for children also decreased, but not as quickly.

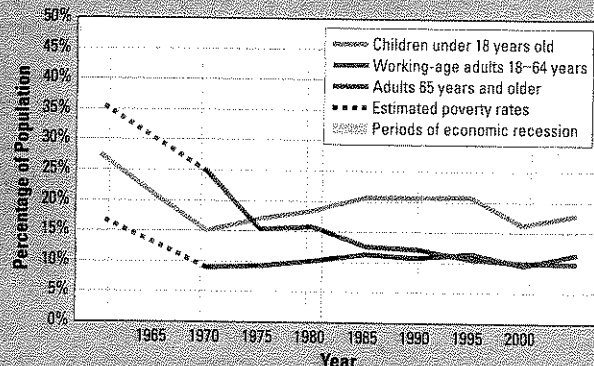
Among working-age adults, the poverty rate has not changed dramatically since 1965. In this group, poverty decreases as level of education increases.

Number of Poor and Poverty Rate in the United States, 1959–2005



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

U.S. Poverty Rate by Age, 1959–2005

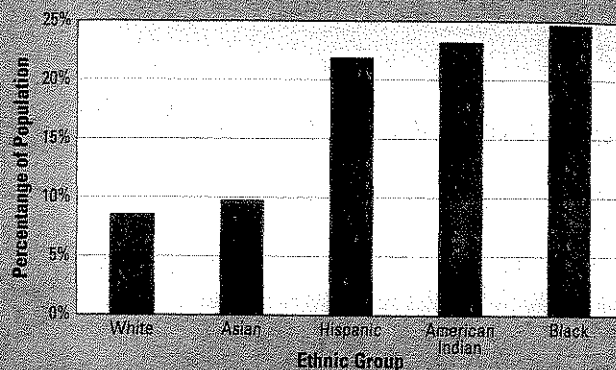


In 2004, the poverty rate for adults aged 25 or older with college degrees was only 4 percent. The rate for those without high school diplomas was six times as high.

**Poverty by Ethnic Group and Country of Origin** As was true when Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America*, whites make up the largest group of poor Americans. Among all ethnic groups, African Americans have made the most dramatic gains since Harrington's time. In 1959, more than half of all blacks lived in poverty. By 2005, that figure had dropped to about one in four. Even so, African Americans' poverty rate is almost three times higher than that of whites.

Beginning in the late 1960s, immigration into the United States increased rapidly. By 2005, the poverty rate for all foreign-born people in the United States was somewhat higher than that for native-born Americans. Over time, however, immigrants' income levels tend to rise. In fact, naturalized citizens have a lower poverty rate than native-born Americans.

U.S. Poverty Rate by Ethnic Group, 2004



## Summary

**Michael Harrington's *The Other America*** revealed that despite the general affluence of the 1950s, millions of "socially invisible" Americans lived in poverty. Although people's views and understanding of poverty have changed over time, the problem persists.

**Defining poverty** Pauperism was once considered a moral failure. Today, poverty is defined in terms of income. People below the poverty line do not have enough income to live decently.

**An invisible class** In *The Other America*, Michael Harrington argued that the poor were "invisible" for many reasons. They lived apart from the middle class but looked much the same. They also played no role in politics.

**Urban poverty** Impoverished minorities became concentrated in decaying cities when the middle class moved out. The Housing Act of 1949 launched urban renewal programs to clear out slums and build new housing. However, many of these housing projects became slums.

**Rural poverty** The growth of agribusiness harmed many farmers. Migrant workers on corporate farms were not paid enough to lift them out of poverty. One of the poorest rural regions, Appalachia, suffered from poor farming conditions and a declining coal industry.

**American Indian policy** Efforts by the federal government to "terminate" its responsibility for Indian tribes led to increased poverty among Native Americans. The Voluntary Relocation Program helped Indians move to cities, but many had trouble adapting to urban life.

**The "other America" today** Despite government efforts, poverty is still a significant problem in the United States. About 37 million Americans lived in poverty in 2005. Today's poor are younger and more diverse than those of the past. They are also more visible in society.