The Middle-Class Family Ideal
A family eats breakfast at a campground in Zion National Park, Utah. Americans embraced a middle-class, nuclear family ideal in the postwar decades. Photo by Justin Locke/National Geographic/Getty Images.

At the height of the Cold War, in 1959, U.S. vice president Richard Nixon debated Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev on the merits of Pepsi-Cola, TV dinners, and electric ovens. Face-to-face at the opening of the American National Exhibit in Moscow, Nixon and Khrushchev strolled through a model American home, assembled to demonstrate the consumer products available to the typical citizen of the United States. Nixon explained to Khrushchev that although the Soviet Union may have had superior rockets, the United States was ahead in other areas, such as color television.

This was Cold War politics by other means—a symbolic contest over which country’s standard of living was higher. What was so striking about the so-called kitchen debate was Nixon’s insistence, to a disbelieving Khrushchev, that a modern home filled with shiny new
refrigerators, toasters, televisions, and all manner of other consumer products was, rather than a luxury, accessible to the average American worker. “Any steelworker could buy this house,” Nixon told the Soviet leader, who stood with other members of the politburo before cameras and reporters. Ever practical, Khrushchev noted, “Many things you’ve shown us are interesting but they are not needed in life.” He added, condescendingly, “They are merely gadgets.”

The kitchen debate settled little in the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. But it speaks to us across the decades because it reveals how Americans had come to see themselves by the late 1950s: as homeowners and consumers, as a people for whom the middle-class American dream was a commercial aspiration. The designers of the model home in Moscow, architect Andrew Geller and developer Herbert Sadkin, went on to build suburban developments on the East Coast, including the aptly named Leisurama on New York’s Long Island. They were among legions of Americans—including architects, developers, advertising executives, and landscape designers—who created new middle-class tastes in the postwar decades.

The real story of the postwar period was the growing number of Americans who adopted those tastes. In the two decades following the end of World War II, nothing short of a new middle class was born in the United States. Fortune magazine estimated that in the 1950s the middle class—defined as families with more than $5,000 in annual earnings after taxes (about $40,000 today)—was increasing at the rate of 1.1 million people per year. Riding a wave of rising incomes, American dominance in the global economy, and Cold War federal spending, the postwar middle class enjoyed the highest standard of living in the world.

However, the success of the middle class could not hide deeper troubles. This was an era of neither universal conformity nor diminishing social strife. Jim Crow laws, contradictions in women’s lives, cultural rebelliousness among young people, and changing sexual mores were only the most obvious sources of social tension. Suburban growth came at the expense of cities, hastening inner-city decay and exacerbating racial segregation. Nor was prosperity ever as widespread as the Moscow exhibit implied. The suburban lifestyle was beyond the reach of the working poor, the elderly, immigrants, Mexican Americans, and most African Americans—indeed, the majority of the country.

Economy: From Recovery to Dominance

The United States enjoyed enormous economic advantages at the close of World War II. While the Europeans and Japanese were still clearing the war’s rubble, America stood poised to enter a postwar boom. As the only major industrial nation not devastated by war, the United States held an unprecedented global position. The American economy also benefited from an expanding internal market and heavy investment in research and development. Two additional developments stood out: One was that, for the first time in the nation’s history, employers generally accepted collective bargaining, which for workers translated into rising wages, expanding benefits, and an increasing rate of home ownership. The other was that the federal government’s outlays for military and domestic programs gave a huge boost to the economy.

Engines of Economic Growth

U.S. corporations, banks, and manufacturers so dominated the world economy that the postwar period has been called the Pax Americana (a Latin term meaning “American Peace” and harking back to the Pax Romana of the first and second centuries a.d.). So confident was he in the nation’s growing power that during World War II, Life magazine publisher Henry Luce had immodestly predicted that the world was witnessing the dawning of the “American century.” The preponderance
of American economic power in the postwar decades, however, was not simply an artifact of the global war—it was not an inevitable development. Several key elements came together, internationally and at home, to propel three decades of unprecedented economic growth.

The Military-Industrial Complex

A second engine of postwar prosperity was defense spending. In his final address to the nation in 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower spoke about the power of what he called the military-industrial complex, which by then employed 3.5 million Americans. Even though his administration had fostered this defense establishment, Eisenhower feared its implications: “We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex,” he said. The military-industrial complex that Eisenhower identified had its roots in the business-government partnerships of World War II. After 1945, though the country was nominally at peace, the economy and the government operated in a state of perpetual readiness for war.

Based at the sprawling Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, the Defense Department evolved into a massive bureaucracy. In the name of national security, defense-related industries entered into long-term relationships with the Pentagon. Some companies did so much business with the government that they in effect became private divisions of the Defense Department. Over 60 percent of the income of Boeing, General Dynamics, and Raytheon, for instance, came from military contracts, and the percentages were even higher for Lockheed and Republic Aviation. In previous peacetime years, military spending had constituted only 1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP); now it represented 10 percent. Economic growth was increasingly dependent on a robust defense sector.

As permanent mobilization took hold, science, industry, and the federal government became intertwined. Federal spending underwrote 90 percent of the cost of research for aviation and space, 65 percent for electricity and electronics, 42 percent for scientific instruments, and even 24 percent for automobiles. With the government footing the bill, corporations lost little time in transforming new technology into useful products. Backed by the Pentagon, for instance, IBM and Sperry Rand pressed ahead with research on integrated circuits, which later spawned the computer revolution.

When the Soviet Union launched the world’s first satellite, Sputnik, in 1957, the startled United States went into high gear to catch up in the Cold War space competition. Alarmed that the United States was falling behind in science and technology, Eisenhower persuaded Congress to appropriate additional money for college scholarships and university research. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 funneled millions of dollars into American universities, helping institutions become the leading research centers in the world.

The defense buildup also created jobs—lots of them. Taking into account the additional positions created to serve and support defense workers, perhaps one American in seven owed his or her job to the military-industrial complex by the 1960s. But increased military spending also limited the resources for domestic social needs. Critics calculated the tradeoffs: The money spent for a nuclear aircraft carrier and support ships could have paid for a subway system for Washington, D.C., while the cost of one Huey helicopter could have built sixty-six units of low-income housing.
The Military-Industrial Complex

Often, technology developed for military purposes, such as the complex design of jet airplanes, was easily transferred to the consumer market. The Boeing Aircraft Company—their Seattle plant is pictured here in the mid-1950s—became one of the leading commercial airplane manufacturers in the world in the 1960s, boosted in part by tax dollar–financed military contracts. Major American corporations—such as Boeing, McDonnell Douglas, General Electric, General Dynamics, and dozens of others—benefited enormously from military contracts from the Department of Defense in the years after World War II. © Bettmann/Corbis.

A Nation of Consumers

The most breathtaking development in the postwar American economy was the dramatic expansion of the domestic consumer market. The sheer quantity of consumer goods available to the average person was without precedent. In some respects, the postwar decades seemed like the 1920s all over again, with an abundance of new gadgets and appliances, a craze for automobiles, and new types of mass media. Yet there was a significant difference: In the 1950s, consumption became associated with citizenship. Buying things, once a sign of personal indulgence, now meant participating fully in American society and, moreover, fulfilling a social responsibility. What the suburban family consumed, asserted Life magazine in a photo essay, would help to ensure “full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation.”

The GI Bill

The new ethic of consumption appealed to the postwar middle class, the driving force behind the expanding domestic market. Middle-class status was more accessible than ever before because of the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the GI Bill. In the immediate
postwar years, more than half of all U.S. college students were veterans attending class on the government’s dime. By the middle of the 1950s, 2.2 million veterans had attended college and another 5.6 million had attended trade school with government financing. The son of an Italian immigrant from Queens, New York, said simply: “It was a hell of a gift, an opportunity, and I’ve never thought of it any other way.” Before the GI Bill, commented another, “I looked upon college education as likely as my owning a Rolls-Royce with a chauffeur.”

**College on the GI Bill**
In 1947—the year this photo was taken of a crowded lecture hall at the University of Iowa—more than 6,000 of this university’s 10,000 students (60 percent) were veterans whose education was financed by the G.I. Bill. Across the country, American universities were bursting at the seams from the massive enrollment of World War II veterans. Government financing of college education for these vets made the U.S. workforce one of the best educated in the world in the 1950s and 1960s. Margaret Bourke-White/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Government financing of education helped make the U.S. workforce the best educated in the world in the 1950s and 1960s. American colleges, universities, and trade schools grew by leaps and bounds to accommodate the flood of students—and expanded again when the children of those students, the baby boomers, reached college age in the 1960s. Better education meant higher earning power, and higher earning power translated into the consumer spending that drove the postwar economy. One observer of the GI Bill was so impressed with its achievements that he declared it responsible for “the most important educational and social transformation in American history.”

The GI Bill stimulated the economy and expanded the middle class in another way. Home ownership increased under its auspices. Between the end of World War II and 1966, one of every five single-family homes built in the United States was financed through a GI Bill mortgage—2.5
million new homes in all. In cities and suburbs across the country, the Veterans Administration (VA), which helped former soldiers purchase new homes with no down payment, sparked a building boom that created jobs in the construction industry and fueled consumer spending in home appliances and automobiles. Education and home ownership were more than personal triumphs for the families of World War II veterans (and Korean War veterans, after a new GI Bill was passed in 1952). They were concrete financial assets that helped lift more Americans than ever before into a mass-consumption-oriented middle class.

Houses, Cars, and Children

Teenagers
These teenage girls and boys are being restrained by police outside an Elvis Presley concert in Florida in 1956. Elvis, who introduced the white middle class to rock ‘n’ roll music in the mid-1950s, was one example of a broader phenomenon: The creation of the “teenager” as a distinct demographic, cultural category, and, perhaps most significantly, consumer group. Beginning in the 1950s, middle-class teenagers had money to spend, and advertisers and other entrepreneurs—such as the music executives who marketed Elvis or the Hollywood executives who invented the “teen film”—sought ways to win their allegiance and their dollars. Photo by Charles Trainor/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Increased educational levels, growing home ownership, and higher wages all enabled more Americans than ever before to become what one historian has called members of a “consumer republic.” But what did they buy? In the emerging suburban nation, three elements came together to create patterns of consumption that would endure for decades: houses, cars, and children.

Consumption for the home, including automobiles, drove the postwar American economy as much as, or more than, the military-industrial complex did. If we think like advertisers and manufacturers, we can see why. Between 1945 and 1970, more than 25 million new houses were built in the United States. Each required its own supply of new appliances, from refrigerators to lawn
mowers. In 1955 alone, Americans purchased 4 million new refrigerators, and between 1940 and 1951 the sale of power mowers increased from 35,000 per year to more than 1 million. Moreover, as American industry discovered planned obsolescence—the encouragement of consumers to replace appliances and cars every few years—the home became a site of perpetual consumer desire.

Children also encouraged consumption. The baby boomers born between World War II and the late 1950s have consistently, throughout every phase of their lives, been the darlings of American advertising and consumption. When they were infants, companies focused on developing new baby products, from disposable diapers to instant formula. When they were toddlers and young children, new television programs, board games, fast food, TV dinners, and thousands of different kinds of toys came to market to supply the rambunctious youth. When they were teenagers, rock music, Hollywood films, and a constantly marketed “teen culture”—with its appropriate clothing, music, hairstyles, and other accessories—bombarded them.

The emergence of commercial television in the United States was swift and overwhelming. In the realm of technology, only the automobile and the personal computer were its equal in transforming everyday life in the twentieth century. In 1947, there were 7,000 TV sets in American homes. A year later, the CBS and NBC radio networks began offering regular programming, and by 1950 Americans owned 7.3 million sets. Ten years later, 87 percent of American homes had at least one television set. Having conquered the home, television would soon become the principle mediator between the consumer and the marketplace.

**Television**

The Saturday Evening Post

![Motorola TV Advertisement](Image)

**Advertising in the TV Age**

Aggressive advertising of new products such as the color television helped fuel the surge in consumer spending during the 1950s. Marketing experts emphasized television’s role in promoting family togetherness, while interior designers offered decorating tips that placed the television at the focal point of living rooms and the increasingly popular “family rooms.” In this 1951 magazine advertisement, the family is watching a variety program starring singer Dinah Shore, who was the television spokeswoman for Chevrolet cars. Every American probably could hum the tune of the little song she sang in praise of the Chevy. Courtesy of Motorola Museum © 1951 Motorola, Inc./Picture Research Consultants & Archives.
Television advertisers mastered the art of creating desire and directing it toward consumption. TV stations, like radio stations before them, depended entirely on advertising for profits. The first television executives understood that as long as they sold viewers to advertisers they would stay on the air. Early corporate-sponsored shows (such as General Electric Theater and U.S. Steel Hour) and simple product jingles (such as “No matter what the time or place, let’s keep up with that happy pace….7-Up your thirst away!”) gave way by the early 1960s to slick advertising campaigns that used popular music, movie stars, sports figures, and stimulating graphics to captivate viewers.

By creating powerful visual narratives of pleasure and comfort, television revolutionized advertising and changed forever the ways products were sold to American, and global, consumers.

- How did the American economy benefit from World War II and the Cold War?
- What were the major factors in the expansion of the middle class in these decades?
- What was the relationship between consumer culture and the emphasis on family life in the postwar era?

A Suburban Nation

Prosperity—how much an economy produces, how much people earn—is more easily measured than is quality of life. During the 1950s, however, the American definition of the good life emerged with exceptional distinctness: a high value on consumption, a preference for suburban living, and a devotion to family and domesticity. In this section, we consider the second dimension of that definition: suburbanization. What drove the nation to abandon its cities for the suburbs, and what social and political consequences did this shift have?

The Postwar Housing Boom

Migration to the suburbs had been going on for a hundred years, but never before on the scale that the country experienced after World War II. Within a decade, farmland on the outskirts of cities filled up with tract housing and shopping malls. Entire counties that had once been rural—such as San Mateo, south of San Francisco, or Passaic and Bergen in New Jersey, west of Manhattan—went suburban. By 1960, one-third of Americans lived in suburbs. Home construction, having ground to a halt during the Great Depression, surged after the war.

William J. Levitt and the FHA

Two unique postwar developments remade the national housing market and gave it a distinctly suburban shape. First, an innovative Long Island building contractor, William J. Levitt, revolutionized suburban housing by applying mass-production techniques and turning out new homes at a dizzying speed. Levitt’s basic four-room house, complete with kitchen appliances, was priced at $7,990 in 1947 (about $76,000 today). Levitt did not need to advertise; word of mouth brought buyers flocking to his developments (all called Levittown) in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Dozens of other developers were soon snapping up cheap farmland and building subdivisions around the country.

Even at $7,990, Levitt’s homes would have been beyond the means of most young families had the traditional home-financing standard—half down and ten years to pay off the balance—still prevailed. That is where the second postwar development came in. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans Administration (VA)—that is, the federal government—made the home mortgage market serve a broader range of Americans than ever before. After the
war, FHA and VA favorable mortgages and lending conditions best explain why home ownership jumped to 60 percent by 1960.

What purchasers of suburban houses got, in addition to a good deal, were homogeneous communities (see Reading American Pictures, “The Suburban Landscape of Cold War America”). The developments contained few old people or unmarried adults. Even the trees were young. Levitt’s company enforced regulations about maintaining lawns and not hanging out laundry on the weekends. Then there was the matter of race. Levitt’s houses came with restrictive covenants prohibiting occupancy “by members of other than the Caucasian Race.” (Restrictive covenants often applied to Jews and, in California, Asian Americans as well.)

After the war, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), and African American civil rights groups launched an ambitious campaign for open-housing ordinances in cities such as Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Oakland. White home owners rebelled, voting for racist politicians who promised to keep neighborhoods white by resisting what they called “Negro invasion.” When politics failed, white homeowners took matters into their own hands. In Chicago, Detroit, and other major northern cities, they bombed, set fires, threw bricks through windows, and employed other tactics to force black homebuyers out of certain neighborhoods. One California newspaper reported in 1948 that “faced with the great influx of colored population, [members of] the Caucasian race [would have] to protect their property values.”

In Shelley v. Kraemer (1948), the Supreme Court outlawed restrictive covenants, but racial discrimination in housing changed little. The practice persisted long after Shelley, because the FHA and VA continued the policy of redlining: refusing mortgages to African Americans and members of other minority groups seeking to buy in white neighborhoods. Indeed, no federal law—or even court decisions like Shelley—actually prohibited racial discrimination in housing until Congress passed the Fair Housing Act in 1968.

Interstate Highways

Without automobiles, suburban growth on such a massive scale would have been impossible. Planners laid out subdivisions on the assumption that everybody would drive. And they did—to get to work, to take the children to Little League, to shop. With gas plentiful and cheap (15 cents a gallon), no one cared about the fuel efficiency of their V-8 engines or seemed to mind the elaborate tail fins and chrome that weighed down their cars. In 1945, Americans owned twenty-five million cars; by 1965, just two decades later, the number had tripled to seventy-five million (see Voices from Abroad, “Hanoch Bartov: Everyone Has a Car”). American oil consumption followed, tripling as well between 1949 and 1972.

More cars required more highways, and the federal government obliged. In 1956, in a move that drastically altered America’s landscape and driving habits, the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act authorized $26 billion over a ten-year period for the construction of a nationally integrated highway system—42,500 miles (Map 26.1). Cast as a Cold War necessity, because broad highways made evacuating crowded cities easier in the event of a nuclear attack, the law changed American cities forever. An enormous public works program surpassing anything undertaken during the New Deal, federal highways made possible the massive suburbanization of the nation in the 1960s. Interstate highways rerouted traffic away from small towns, bypassed well-traveled main roads such as the cross-country Route 66, and cut wide swaths through old neighborhoods in the cities.
Connecting the Nation

The 1956 Interstate and Defense Highways Act paved the way for an extensive network of federal highways throughout the nation. The act not only pleased American drivers and enhanced their love affair with the automobile but also benefited the petroleum, construction, trucking, real estate, and tourist industries. The new highway system promoted the nation’s economic integration, facilitated the growth of suburbs, and contributed to the erosion of America’s distinct regional identities.

Fast Food and Shopping Malls

Americans did not simply fill their new suburban homes with the latest appliances and gadgets; they also pioneered entirely new forms of consumption. As suburbanites abandoned big-city centers in the 1950s, ambitious entrepreneurs invented two new commercial forms that would profoundly shape the rest of the century: the shopping mall and the fast-food restaurant.

By the late 1950s, the suburban shopping center had become as much a part of the American landscape as the Levittowns and their imitators.

No one was more influential in creating suburban patterns of consumption than a Chicago-born son of Czech immigrants named Ray Kroc. A former jazz musician and traveling salesman, Kroc found his calling in 1954 when he acquired a single franchise of the little-known McDonald’s Restaurant, based in San Bernardino, California. In 1956, Kroc invested in twelve more franchises and by 1958 owned seventy-nine. Three years later, Kroc bought the company from the McDonald brothers and proceeded to turn it into the largest chain of restaurants in the world. Based on inexpensive, quickly served hamburgers that hungry families could eat in the restaurant, in their cars, or at home, Kroc’s vision transformed the way Americans consumed food.

Rise of the Sunbelt

Suburban living, although a nationwide phenomenon, was most at home in the Sunbelt (the southern and southwestern states), where taxes were low, the climate was mild, and open space allowed for sprawling subdivisions (Map 26.2). Florida added 3.5 million people, many of them retired, between 1940 and 1970. Texas profited from expanding petrochemical and defense industries. Most dramatic was California’s growth, spurred especially by the state’s booming defense-related aircraft and electronics industries. By 1970, California contained one-tenth of the nation’s population and
surpassed New York as the most populous state. At the end of the century, California’s economy was among the top ten largest in the world—among nations.

A distinctive feature of Sunbelt suburbanization was its close relationship to the military-industrial complex. Building on World War II expansion, military bases proliferated in the South and Southwest in the postwar decades, especially in Florida, Texas, and California. In some instances, entire metropolitan regions—such as San Diego County, California, and the Houston area in Texas—expanded in tandem with nearby military outposts. Moreover, the aerospace, defense, and electronics industries were based largely in Sunbelt metropolitan regions.

**Fast Food, 1949**
The sign atop this suburban Los Angeles restaurant says it all. Suburbanization laid the foundation for a unique postwar phenomenon that would forever change American life: The rise of fast food. Cheap, convenient, and "fast," the food served in the new restaurants, modeled after the industry’s pioneer, McDonald’s, was not necessarily nutritious, but its chief advantage was portability. Loomis Dean/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.
Two Nations: Urban and Suburban

While middle-class whites flocked to the suburbs, an opposite stream of working-class migrants, many of them southern African Americans, moved into the cities. In the 1950s, the nation’s twelve largest cities lost 3.6 million whites while gaining 4.5 million nonwhites. These urban newcomers inherited a declining economy and a decaying infrastructure. To those enjoying prosperity, the “other America,” as the social critic Michael Harrington called it, remained largely invisible. In 1968, however, a report by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (informally known as the Kerner Commission), delivered to President Lyndon Baines Johnson, warned that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal.”

American cities had long been the home of poverty, slum housing, and the hardships and cultural dislocations brought on by immigration from overseas or migration from rural areas. But postwar American cities, especially those in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, experienced these problems with new intensity. By the 1950s, the manufacturing sector was contracting, and mechanization was eliminating thousands upon thousands of unskilled and semiskilled jobs, the kind traditionally taken up by new urban residents. The disappearing jobs were the ones “in which Negroes are disproportionately concentrated,” noted the civil rights activist Bayard Rustin.

The Urban Crisis

The intensification of poverty, the deterioration of older housing stock, and the persistence of racial segregation produced what many at the time called the urban crisis. Unwelcome in the shiny new suburbs built by men such as William J. Levitt, blacks found low-paying jobs in the city and lived in aging apartment buildings run by slumlords. Despite a thriving black middle class—indeed, larger than ever before—for those without resources, upward mobility remained elusive. Racism in institutional forms frustrated African Americans at every turn: housing restrictions, increasingly segregated schools, and an urban infrastructure that stood underfunded and decaying as whites left for the suburbs.

Urban Crisis

This Pittsburgh neighborhood, photographed in 1955, typified what many came to call the "urban crisis" of the 1950s and 1960s. As suburbanization drew middle-class residents, investment, and jobs away from the core of older cities, those cities began to rot from the inside. Urban neglect left many working-class neighborhoods, increasingly occupied by the nation’s
Housing and job discrimination were compounded by the frenzy of urban renewal that hit black neighborhoods in the 1950s and early 1960s. Seeking to revitalize declining city centers, urban planners, politicians, and real estate developers proposed razing blighted neighborhoods to make way for modern construction projects that would appeal to the fleeing middle class.

The urban experts believed they knew what to do with the dislocated: relocate them to federally funded housing projects, an outgrowth of New Deal housing policy, now much expanded and combined with generous funding for slum clearance. However well intended, these grim projects too often took the form of cheap high-rise slums that isolated their inhabitants from surrounding neighborhoods. The impact was felt especially strongly among African Americans, who often found that public housing increased racial segregation and concentrated the poor.

**Urban Immigrants**

Despite the evident urban crisis, cities continued to attract immigrants from abroad. Since the passage of the National Origins Act of 1924 (see Chapter 22), U.S. immigration policy had aimed mainly at keeping foreigners out. But World War II and the Cold War began slowly to change American policy. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 permitted the entry of approximately 415,000 Europeans, many of them Jewish refugees. In a gesture to an important war ally, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943. More far-reaching was the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, which ended the exclusion of Japanese, Koreans, and Southeast Asians.

After the national-origins quota system went into effect in 1924, Mexico replaced Eastern and Southern Europe as the nation’s labor reservoir. During World War II, the federal government introduced the Bracero Program to ease wartime labor shortages (see Chapter 24) and then revived it in 1951, during the Korean War. The federal government’s ability to force workers to return to Mexico, however, was strictly limited. The Mexican population continued to grow, and by the time the Bracero Program ended in 1964, many of that group—an estimated 350,000—had settled permanently in the United States. Braceros were joined by other Mexicans from small towns and villages, who immigrated to the United States to escape poverty or to earn money to return home and purchase land for farming.

As generations of immigrants had before them, Mexicans gravitated to major cities. Mostly, they settled in Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Jose, El Paso, and other southwestern cities. But many also went north, augmenting well-established Mexican American communities in Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, and Denver. Although still important to American agriculture, Mexican Americans were employed in substantial numbers as industrial and service workers by 1960.
West Side Story

The influx of Puerto Rican immigrants after World War II inspired the 1957 Broadway hit West Side Story (a still from the 1961 film version is shown here). Arthur Laurents’s plot recast Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in a Puerto Rican neighborhood on New York’s West Side in the 1950s, with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The violent confrontations between two rival youth gangs, one Puerto Rican and the other white (primarily Polish American), were set to highly stylized dance routines. The

Another major group of Spanish-speaking migrants came from Puerto Rico. American citizens since 1917, Puerto Ricans enjoyed an unrestricted right to move to the mainland United States. Most Puerto Ricans went to New York, where they settled first in East (“Spanish”) Harlem and then scattered in neighborhoods across the city’s five boroughs. This massive migration, which increased the Puerto Rican population to 613,000 by 1960, transformed the ethnic composition of the city. More Puerto Ricans now lived in New York City than in San Juan.

Cuban refugees constituted the third largest group of Spanish-speaking immigrants. In the six years after Fidel Castro’s seizure of power in 1959 (see Chapter 25), an estimated 180,000 people fled Cuba for the United States. The Cuban refugee community grew so quickly that it turned Miami into a cosmopolitan, bilingual city almost overnight. Unlike other urban migrants, Miami’s Cubans quickly prospered, in large part because they had arrived with money and middle-class skills.

Spanish-speaking immigrants—whether Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban—created huge barrios in major American cities, where bilingualism flourished, the Catholic Church shaped religious life, and families sought to join the economic mainstream. Though distinct from one another, these Spanish-speaking communities remained largely segregated from white, or Anglo, neighborhoods and suburbs as well as from African American districts.

- In what ways did the federal government shape postwar suburbanization?
- How are we to explain the relationship between suburbanization and consumption?
- In what sense was the United States “two nations”?

Gender, Sex, and Family in the Era of Containment

Marriage, family structure, and gender roles had been undergoing significant changes since the turn of the twentieth century
The Baby Boom

Two things were noteworthy about the families they formed after World War II. First, marriages were remarkably stable. Not until the mid-1960s did the divorce rate begin to rise sharply. Second, married couples were intent on having babies. Everyone expected to have several children—it was part of adulthood, almost a citizen’s responsibility. After a century and a half of decline, the birthrate shot up. More babies were born between 1948 and 1953 than in the previous thirty years (Figure 26.3).

One of the reasons for this baby boom was that people were having children at the same time. A second was a drop in the average marriage age—down to twenty-two for men and twenty for women. Younger parents meant a bumper crop of children. Women who came of age in the 1930s averaged 2.4 children; their counterparts in the 1950s averaged 3.2 children. The baby boom peaked in 1957 and remained at a high level until the early 1960s. Far from “normal,” all of these developments were anomalies, temporary reversals of long-standing demographic trends. From the perspective of the whole of the twentieth century, the 1950s and early 1960s stand out as exceptions to declining birthrates, rising divorce rates, and the steadily rising marriage age.

Improving Health and Education

Baby boom children benefited from a host of important advances in public health and medical practice in the postwar years. Formerly serious illnesses became merely routine after the introduction of such “miracle drugs” as penicillin (introduced in 1943), streptomycin (1945), and cortisone (1946). When Dr. Jonas Salk perfected a polio vaccine in 1954, he became a national hero. The free distribution of Salk’s vaccine in the nation’s schools, followed in 1961 by Dr. Albert Sabin’s oral polio vaccine, demonstrated the potential of government-sponsored public health programs.

The baby boom also gave the nation’s educational system a boost. Postwar middle-class parents, America’s first college-educated generation, placed a high value on education. Suburban parents approved 90 percent of school bond issues during the 1950s. By 1970, school expenditures accounted for 7.2 percent of the gross national product, double the 1950 level. In the 1960s, the baby boom generation swelled college enrollments.
To keep baby boom children healthy and happy, middle-class parents increasingly relied on the advice of experts. Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* sold 1 million copies every year after its publication in 1946. Spock urged mothers to abandon the rigid feeding and baby-care schedules of an earlier generation. New mothers found Spock’s common-sense approach liberating. “Your little paperback is still in my cupboard, with loose pages, rather worn from use because I brought up two babies using it as my ‘Bible,’” a California housewife wrote to Spock.

**Women, Work, and Family**

Two powerful forces shaped women’s relationships to work and family life in the postwar decades. One was the middle-class domestic ideal, which feminist Betty Friedan would later call the “feminine mystique.” “The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American women” in the 1950s, Friedan wrote. “She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home.” The second force was the job market. Most working-class women had to earn a paycheck to help their family. Despite their education, middle-class women found that jobs in the professions and business were dominated by men and often closed to them.

Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*—written and researched largely in the late 1950s. Friedan had graduated from Smith College in 1942; and in 1957, fifteen years later, married with children, living in suburban New York and working as a freelance writer, she traveled around the country to interview her Smith College classmates about the state of their lives for what was supposed to be a soft article for a women’s magazine. Almost without exception, she claimed, the women she encountered were married, with children, living in prosperous, upper-middle-class suburbs. They were living out the dream that affluent bourgeois society had created for women in the postwar years, what Friedan called the “mystique of feminine fulfillment,” by acting out the expected roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers. They responded to questions about their lives with forced, chirpy reports of contentment—proud talk of husbands, children, and homes. And yet, as Friedan pressed further, she found that behind this mystique, in virtually all the women she interviewed, lay a fundamental sense of uneasiness, frustration, vague unhappiness that most women had great difficulty articulating. Friedan dubbed this the "problem that has no name," a problem that even women themselves had been unable to identify or explain.

But the real problem, Friedan said, was embedded in the nature of the gender roles society had imposed on women. The women she met were intelligent, educated, talented; and yet they had no outlets for their talents except housework, motherhood, and the companionship they offered their husbands. “The feminine mystique,” she wrote, “has succeeded in burying millions of women alive.”
Middle-class women’s lives grew increasingly complicated in the postwar decades. They may have dreamed of a suburban home with a brand-new kitchen, like the one shown in this 1955 photograph, but laboring all day over children, dirty dishes, and a hot stove proved dissatisfying to many. Betty Friedan called the confinement of women’s identities to motherhood the “feminine mystique.” Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos.

Did the working woman have it much better? Hardly. Most women in the 1950s and 1960s were confined to low-level secretarial work, waitressing, and other service-sector work—or, worse, factory or domestic labor. By the end of the 1960s, women had begun to crack the “glass ceiling” and enter the professions in larger numbers. But regardless of their occupation, the majority of working women performed the “double day”: a full day at work and full day at home. Such were the expectations and double-bind women faced. Inge Morath © The Inge Morath Foundation/Magnum Photos.

One of the most striking developments in American family life in the postwar decades was the emergence of the teenager as a cultural phenomenon. In 1956, only partly in jest, the CBS radio commentator Eric Sevareid questioned “whether the teenagers will take over the United States lock, stock, living room, and garage.” Sevareid was grumbling about American youth culture, a phenomenon first noticed in the 1920s and with its roots in the lengthening years of education, the role of peer groups, and the consumer tastes of teenagers.

Hollywood movies played a large role in fostering a teenage culture. Young people made up the largest audience for motion pictures, and Hollywood studios learned over the course of the
1950s to cater to them. The success of films such as *The Wild One* (1953), starring Marlon Brando; *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), with Sidney Poitier; and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), starring James Dean, convinced movie executives that films directed at teenagers were worthy investments. “What are you rebelling against?” Brando is asked in *The Wild One*. “Whattaya got?” he replies.

What really defined the youth culture, however, was its music. Rejecting the romantic ballads of the 1940s, teenagers discovered rock ‘n’ roll, which originated in African American rhythm and blues. The Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed took the lead in introducing white America to the black-created sound by playing what were called “race” records. “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars,” a record company owner is quoted as saying. The performer who fit that bill was Elvis Presley, who rocketed into instant celebrity in 1956 with his hit records “Hound Dog” and “Heartbreak Hotel,” covers of songs originally recorded by black artists such as Big Momma Thornton. Between 1953 and 1959, record sales increased from $213 million to $603 million, with rock ‘n’ roll as the driving force.

**Motown**

Mary Wilson, Diana Ross, and Florence Ballard (from left to right) were the founding members of the Motown singing group the Supremes (shown here in concert, in 1963) that produced twelve number-one singles. Motown, a record label owned by African American entrepreneur Berry Gordy, specialized in so-called “cross-over” acts: black singers who sold records to white audiences. In the era of Jim Crow, Motown represented a small but noteworthy step toward a less racially segregated American culture. © Steve Schapiro/Corbis.

- How would you explain the contradictions in postwar domesticity? What were the benefits of domestic values? The costs?
- What were the cultural expectations of men and women in the 1950s? How had they changed from the 1920s? The 1930s?
Coming of Age in the Postwar Years

At the dawn of the postwar era, Americans faced new opportunities and new anxieties. Many former soldiers attended college on the GI Bill, part of a massive expansion of the nation’s educational system. With a college education, veterans found their lives forever changed. Women faced new pressures to realize the ideal role of housewife and mother. And on the horizon, in both reality and in the American imagination, lurked Communism, which Americans feared but little understood. Recorded here are several different reactions to these postwar tensions, distinct experiences of coming of age in the 1940s and 1950s.

Art Buchwald

Studying on the GI Bill

Art Buchwald was one of the best-known humorists in American journalism in the 1950s and 1960s. His column in the Washington Post was widely reprinted. But in 1946, he was an ordinary ex-serviceman hoping to use the GI Bill to go to college. It was time to face up to whether I was serious about attending school. My decision was to go down to the University of Southern California and find out what I should study at night to get into the place. There were at least 4,000 ex-GIs waiting to register. I stood in line with them. Hours later, I arrived at the counter and said, “I would like to…” The clerk said, “Fill this out.”

Having been accepted as a full-time student under the G.I. Bill, I was entitled to seventy-five dollars a month plus tuition, books, and supplies….Meanwhile, I found a boardinghouse a few blocks from campus, run by a cheery woman who was like a mother to her thirteen boarders. While she liked us very much, she hated blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Orientals, and other minorities—not necessarily in that order. She used to subscribe to a German newspaper with a swastika on the front page. I saw it in her living room when I went to pay my rent. Mrs. Liebschen did not connect her tenants with the races and nationalities she despised….

At the time, just after the Second World War had ended, an undeclared class war was going on at USC. The G.I.s returning home had little use for the fraternity men, since most of the frat boys were not only much younger, but considered very immature.

The G.I.s were intent on getting their educations and starting new lives. Some fraternity people partied, drank, cheated on tests, and tried to take over school politics. In those days, the administration catered to the fraternities, knowing that eventually they would be the big financial supporters of the school, as opposed to the independents, who would probably not be heard from again….

It wasn’t my first decision to favor the have-nots over the haves. I had been doing it all my life, and I confess that it may have had something to do with my envy of the haves, starting with their Christmas trees and girlfriends under the clock at the Biltmore.


Betty Friedan

Living the Feminine Mystique

Like Buchwald, Betty Friedan would one day become famous as a writer—in her case, as a feminist who wrote one of the most widely read books of the 1960s, The Feminine Mystique. In the late 1940s, Friedan was not yet a feminist, as she notes, but she was deeply engaged in the politics of the era. That was the year it really hit, the feminine mystique, though at the time we didn’t know what it was. It was just that our lives seemed to have shifted in dimension, in perspective….

And then the boys our age had come back from the war. I was bumped from my job on a small labor news service by a returning veteran, and it wasn’t so easy to find another job I really liked. I filled out the applications for Time-Life researcher, which I’d always scorned before. All the girls I knew had jobs like that, but it was official policy that no matter
how good, researchers, who were women, could never become writers or editors. They could write the whole article, but the men they were working with would always get the by-line as writer. I was certainly not a feminist then—none of us were a bit interested in women’s rights. But I could never bring myself to take that kind of job….

After the war, I had been very political, very involved, consciously radical. Not about women, for heaven’s sake! If you were a radical in 1949, you were concerned about the Negroes, and the working class, and World War III, and the Un-American Activities Committee and McCarthy and loyalty oaths, and Communist splits and schisms, Russia, China and the UN, but you certainly didn’t think about being a woman, politically. It was only recently that we had begun to think of ourselves as women at all. But that wasn’t political—it was the opposite of politics.


Susan Allen Toth

**Learning About Communism**

Toth is a writer and scholar who grew up in Ames, Iowa, a small college town surrounded by cornfields. She writes here about her experience learning just how anxious people could become in the 1950s when the issue of communism was raised.

Of course, we all knew there was Communism. As early as sixth grade our teacher warned us about its dangers. I listened carefully to Mr. Casper describe what Communists wanted, which sounded terrible. World domination. Enslavement. Destruction of our way of life…. I hung around school one afternoon hoping to catch Mr. Casper, whom I secretly adored, to ask him why Communism was so bad. He stayed in another teacher’s room so late I finally scrawled my question on our blackboard: “Dear Mr. Casper, why is Communism so bad…Sue Allen” and went home. Next morning the message was still there. Like a warning from heaven it had galvanized Mr. Casper. He began class with a stern lecture, repeating everything he had said about dangerous Russians and painting a vivid picture of how we would all suffer if the Russians took over the city government in Ames. We certainly wouldn’t be able to attend a school like this, he said, where free expression of opinion was allowed. At recess that day one of the boys asked me if I was a “dirty Commie”: two of my best friends shied away from me on the playground; I saw Mr. Casper talking low to another teacher and pointing at me. I cried all the way home from school and resolved never to commit myself publicly with a question like that again.


**ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE**

- What do you think Buchwald meant by “an undeclared class war”? Why would the influx of former soldiers into colleges on the GI Bill create conflict?
- Why do you think Friedan “didn’t think about being a woman, politically” in the 1940s and 1950s? Did other political issues crowd out women’s concerns? Why do you think she was “bumped from” her job by a “returning veteran”?
- What does Toth’s experience as a young student suggest about American anxieties during the Cold War? Why could her question so easily become a source of embarrassment and ridicule?
SUMMARY

We have explored how, at the same time it became mired in the Cold War, the United States entered an unparalleled era of prosperity in which a new middle class came into being. Indeed, the Cold War was one of the engines of prosperity. The postwar economy was marked by the dominance of big corporations and defense spending.

After years of depression and war-induced insecurity, Americans turned inward toward religion, home, and family. Postwar couples married young, had several children, and—if they were white and middle class—raised their children in a climate of suburban comfort and consumerism. The pro-family orientation of the 1950s celebrated traditional gender roles, even though millions of women entered the workforce in those years. Not everyone, however, shared in the postwar prosperity. Postwar cities increasingly became places of last resort for the nation’s poor. Black migrants, unlike earlier immigrants, encountered an urban economy that had little use for them. Without opportunity, and faced by pervasive racism, many of them were on their way to becoming an American underclass, even as sparkling new suburbs emerged outside cities to house the new middle class. Many of the smoldering contradictions of the postwar period—Cold War anxiety in the midst of suburban domesticity, tensions in women’s lives, economic and racial inequality—helped spur the protest movements of the 1960s.

CHAPTER REVIEW QUESTIONS

- How do you account for the economic prosperity of the postwar era?
- Why did the suburb achieve paramount significance for Americans in the 1950s?
- Who were the people left out of the postwar boom? How do you account for their exclusion?