

THE EISENHOWER YEARS, 1952–1960

*We conclude that in the field of public education
the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place.
Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.*

Earl Warren, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, May 17, 1954

The 1950s have the popular image of the “happy days,” when the nation prospered and teens enjoyed the new beat of rock-and-roll music. This nostalgic view of the fifties is correct—but limited. The decade started with a war in Korea and the incriminations of McCarthyism. From the point of view of African Americans, what mattered most about the 1950s was not so much the music of Elvis Presley but the resistance of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. to segregation in the South. While middle-class suburbanites enjoyed their chrome-trimmed cars and tuned in to *I Love Lucy* on their new television sets, the Cold War and threat of nuclear destruction loomed in the background.

Eisenhower Takes Command

Much as Franklin Roosevelt dominated the 1930s, President Dwight (“Ike”) Eisenhower personified the 1950s. The Republican campaign slogan, “I Like Ike,” expressed the genuine feelings of millions of middle-class Americans. They liked his winning smile and trusted and admired the former general who had successfully commanded Allied forces in Europe in World War II.

The Election of 1952

In 1952, the last year of Truman’s presidency, Americans were looking for relief from the Korean War and an end to political scandals commonly referred to as “the mess in Washington.” Republicans looked forward with relish to their first presidential victory in 20 years. In the Republican primaries, voters had a choice between the Old Guard’s favorite, Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, and the war hero, Eisenhower. Most of them liked “Ike,” who went on to win the Republican nomination. Conservative supporters of Taft balanced the ticket by persuading Eisenhower to choose Richard Nixon for his running mate. This young California senator had made a name for himself attacking Communists in the Alger Hiss case.

The Democrats selected popular Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, whose wit, eloquence, and courage in confronting McCarthyism appealed to liberals.

Campaign Highlights A nonpolitician, Eisenhower had a spotless reputation for integrity that was almost spoiled by reports that his running mate, Richard Nixon, had used campaign funds for his own personal use. Nixon was almost dropped from the ticket. However, he saved his political future by effectively defending himself using the new medium of television. In his so-called Checkers speech, Nixon won the support of millions of viewers by tugging at their heartstrings. With his wife and daughters around him, he emotionally vowed never to return the gift of their beloved dog, Checkers.

What really put distance between the Republicans and the Democrats was Eisenhower's pledge during the last days of the campaign to go to Korea and end the war. The Eisenhower-Nixon ticket went on to win over 55 percent of the popular vote and an electoral college landslide of 442 to Stevenson's 89.

Domestic Policies

As president, Eisenhower adopted a style of leadership that emphasized the delegation of authority. He filled his cabinet with successful corporate executives who gave his administration a businesslike tone. His secretary of defense, for example, was Charles Wilson, the former head of General Motors. Eisenhower was often criticized by the press for spending too much time golfing and fishing and perhaps entrusting important decisions to others. However, later research showed that behind the scenes Eisenhower was in charge.

Modern Republicanism Eisenhower was a fiscal conservative whose first priority was balancing the budget after years of deficit spending. Although his annual budgets were not always balanced, he came closer to curbing federal spending than any of his successors. As a moderate on domestic issues, he accepted most of the New Deal programs as a reality of modern life and even extended some of them. During Eisenhower's two terms in office, Social Security was extended to 10 million more citizens, the minimum wage was raised, and additional public housing was built. In 1953, Eisenhower consolidated welfare programs by creating the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) under Oveta Culp Hobby, the first woman in a Republican cabinet. For farmers, a soil-bank program was initiated as means of reducing farm production and thereby increasing farm income. On the other hand, Eisenhower opposed the ideas of federal health care insurance and federal aid to education.

As the first Republican president since Hoover, Eisenhower called his balanced and moderate approach "modern Republicanism." His critics called it "the bland leading the bland."

Interstate Highway System The most permanent legacy of the Eisenhower years was the passage in 1956 of the Highway Act, which authorized the construction of 42,000 miles of interstate highways linking all the nation's major cities. When completed, the U.S. highway system became a model for

the rest of the world. The justification for new taxes on fuel, tires, and vehicles was to improve national defense. At the same time, this immense public works project created jobs, promoted the trucking industry, accelerated the growth of the suburbs, and contributed to a more homogeneous national culture. The emphasis on cars, trucks, and highways, however, hurt the railroads and ultimately the environment. Little attention was paid to public transportation, on which the old and the poor depended.

Prosperity Eisenhower's domestic legislation was modest. During his years in office, however, the country enjoyed a steady growth rate, with an inflation rate averaging a negligible 1.5 percent. Although the federal budget had a small surplus only three times in eight years, the deficits fell in relation to the national wealth. For these reasons, some historians rate Eisenhower's economic policies the most successful of any modern president's. Between 1945 and 1960, the per-capita disposable income of Americans more than tripled. By the mid-1950s, the average American family had twice the real income of a comparable family during the boom years of the 1920s. The postwar economy gave Americans the highest standard of living in the world.

The Election of 1956

Toward the end of his first term, in 1955, Eisenhower suffered a heart attack and had major surgery in 1956. Democrats questioned whether his health was strong enough for election to a second term. Four years of peace and prosperity, however, made Ike more popular than ever, and the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket was enthusiastically renominated by the Republicans. The Democrats again nominated Adlai Stevenson. In this political rematch, Eisenhower won by an even greater margin than in 1952. It was a personal victory only, however, as the Democrats retained control of both houses of Congress.

Eisenhower and the Cold War

Most of Eisenhower's attention in both his first and second terms focused on foreign policy and various international crises arising from the Cold War. The experienced diplomat who helped to shape U.S. foreign policy throughout Eisenhower's presidency was Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

Dulles' Diplomacy

Dulles had been critical of Truman's containment policy as too passive. He advocated a "new look" to U.S. foreign policy that took the initiative in challenging the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. He talked of "liberating captive nations" of Eastern Europe and encouraging the Nationalist government of Taiwan to assert itself against "Red" (Communist) China. Dulles pleased conservatives—and alarmed many others—by declaring that, if the United States pushed Communist powers to the brink of war, they would back down because of American nuclear superiority. His hard line became known as "brinkmanship." In the end, however, Eisenhower prevented Dulles from carrying his ideas to an extreme.

Massive Retaliation Dulles advocated placing greater reliance on nuclear weapons and air power and spending less on conventional forces of the army and navy. In theory, this would save money (“more bang for the buck”), help balance the federal budget, and increase pressure on potential enemies. In 1953, the United States developed the hydrogen bomb, which could destroy the largest cities. Within a year, however, the Soviets caught up with a hydrogen bomb of their own. To some, the policy of massive retaliation looked more like a policy for mutual extinction. Nuclear weapons indeed proved a powerful deterrent against the superpowers fighting an all-out war between themselves, but such weapons could not prevent small “brushfire” wars from breaking out in the developing nations of Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. However, Eisenhower refused to use even small nuclear weapons in these conflicts.

Unrest in the Third World

Decolonization, or the collapse of colonial empires, after World War II may have been the single most important development of the postwar era. Between 1947 and 1962, dozens of colonies in Asia and Africa gained their independence from former colonial powers such as Britain, France, and the Netherlands. In Asia, India and Pakistan became new nations in 1947, and the Dutch East Indies became the independent country of Indonesia in 1949. In Africa, Ghana threw off British colonial rule in 1957, and a host of other nations followed. These new Third World countries (in contrast to the industrialized nations of the Western bloc and the Communist bloc) often lacked stable political and economic institutions. Their need for foreign aid from either the United States or the Soviet Union often made them into pawns of the Cold War.

Covert Action Part of the new look in Eisenhower’s conduct of U.S. foreign policy was the growing use of covert action. Undercover intervention in the internal politics of other nations seemed less objectionable than employing U.S. troops and also proved less expensive. In 1953, the CIA helped overthrow a government in Iran that had tried to nationalize the holding of foreign oil companies. The overthrow of the elected government allowed for the return of Reza Pahlavi as shah (monarch) of Iran. The shah in return provided the West with favorable oil prices and made enormous purchases of American arms.

In Guatemala, in 1954, the CIA overthrew a leftist government that threatened American business interests. U.S. opposition to communism seemed to drive Washington to support corrupt and often ruthless dictators, especially in Latin America. In addition, the CIA, acting in secret and under lax control by civilian officials, planned assassinations of national leaders, such as Fidel Castro of Cuba. CIA operations fueled anti-American feelings, especially in Latin America, but the long-term damage was to U.S. relations with Iran.

Asia

During Eisenhower’s first year in office, some of the most serious Cold War challenges concerned events in East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Korean Armistice Soon after his inauguration in 1953, Eisenhower kept his election promise by going to Korea to visit U.N. forces and see what could be done to stop the war. He understood that no quick fix was possible. Even so, diplomacy, the threat of nuclear war, and the sudden death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953 finally moved China and North Korea to agree to an armistice and an exchange of prisoners in July 1953. The fighting stopped and most (but not all) U.S. troops were withdrawn. Korea would remain divided near the 38th parallel, and despite years of futile negotiations, no peace treaty was ever concluded between North Korea and South Korea.

Fall of Indochina After losing their Southeast Asian colony of Indochina to Japanese invaders in World War II, the French made the mistake of trying to retake it. Wanting independence, native Vietnamese and Cambodians resisted. French imperialism had the effect of increasing support for nationalist and Communist leader Ho Chi Minh. By 1950, the anticolonial war in Indochina became part of the Cold War rivalry between Communist and anticommunist powers. Truman's government started to give U.S. military aid to the French, while China and the Soviet Union aided the Viet Minh guerrillas led by Ho Chi Minh. In 1954, a large French army at Dien Bien Phu was trapped and forced to surrender. After this disastrous defeat, the French tried to convince Eisenhower to send in U.S. troops, but he refused. At the Geneva Conference of 1954, France agreed to give up Indochina, which was divided into the independent nations of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Division of Vietnam By the terms of the Geneva Conference, Vietnam was to be temporarily divided at the 17th parallel until a general election could be held. The new nation remained divided, however, as two hostile governments took power on either side of the line. In North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh established a Communist dictatorship. In South Vietnam, a government emerged under Ngo Dinh Diem, whose support came largely from anticommunist, Catholic, and urban Vietnamese, many of whom had fled from Communist rule in the North. The general election to unite Vietnam was never held, largely because South Vietnam's government feared that the Communists would win.

From 1955 to 1961, the United States gave over \$1 billion in economic and military aid to South Vietnam in an effort to build a stable, anticommunist state. In justifying this aid, President Eisenhower made an analogy to a row of dominoes. According to this *domino theory* (later to become famous), if South Vietnam fell under Communist control, one nation after another in Southeast Asia would also fall, until Australia and New Zealand were in dire danger.

SEATO To prevent South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from "falling" to communism, Dulles put together a regional defense pact called the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Agreeing to defend one another in case of an attack within the region, eight nations signed the pact in 1954: the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan.

The Middle East

In the Middle East, the United States tried to balance maintaining friendly ties with the oil-rich Arab states while at the same time supporting the new state of Israel. The latter nation was created in 1948 under U.N. auspices, after a civil war in the British mandate territory of Palestine left the land divided between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Israel's neighbors, including Egypt, had fought unsuccessfully to prevent the Jewish state from being formed.

Suez Crisis Led by the Arab nationalist General Gamal Nasser, Egypt asked the United States for funds to build the ambitious Aswan Dam project on the Nile River. The United States refused, in part because Egypt threatened Israel's security. Nasser turned to the Soviet Union to help build the dam. The Soviets agreed to provide limited financing for the project. Seeking another source of funds, Nasser precipitated an international crisis in July 1956 by seizing and nationalizing the British- and French-owned Suez Canal that passed through Egyptian territory. Loss of the canal threatened Western Europe's supply line to Middle Eastern oil. In response to this threat, Britain, France, and Israel carried out a surprise attack against Egypt and retook the canal.

Eisenhower, furious that he had been kept in the dark about the attack by his old allies the British and French, sponsored a U.N. resolution condemning the invasion of Egypt. Under pressure from the United States and world public opinion, the invading forces withdrew.

Eisenhower Doctrine The United States quickly replaced Britain and France as the leading Western influence in the Middle East, but it faced a growing Soviet influence in Egypt and Syria. In a policy pronouncement later known as the *Eisenhower Doctrine*, the United States in 1957 pledged economic and military aid to any Middle Eastern country threatened by communism. Eisenhower first applied his doctrine in 1958 by sending 14,000 marines to Lebanon to prevent a civil war between Christians and Muslims.

OPEC and Oil In Eisenhower's last year in office, 1960, the Arab nations of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran joined Venezuela to form the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Oil was shaping up to be a critical foreign policy issue. The combination of Western dependence on Middle East oil, Arab nationalism, and a conflict between Israelis and Palestinian refugees would trouble American presidents in the coming decades.

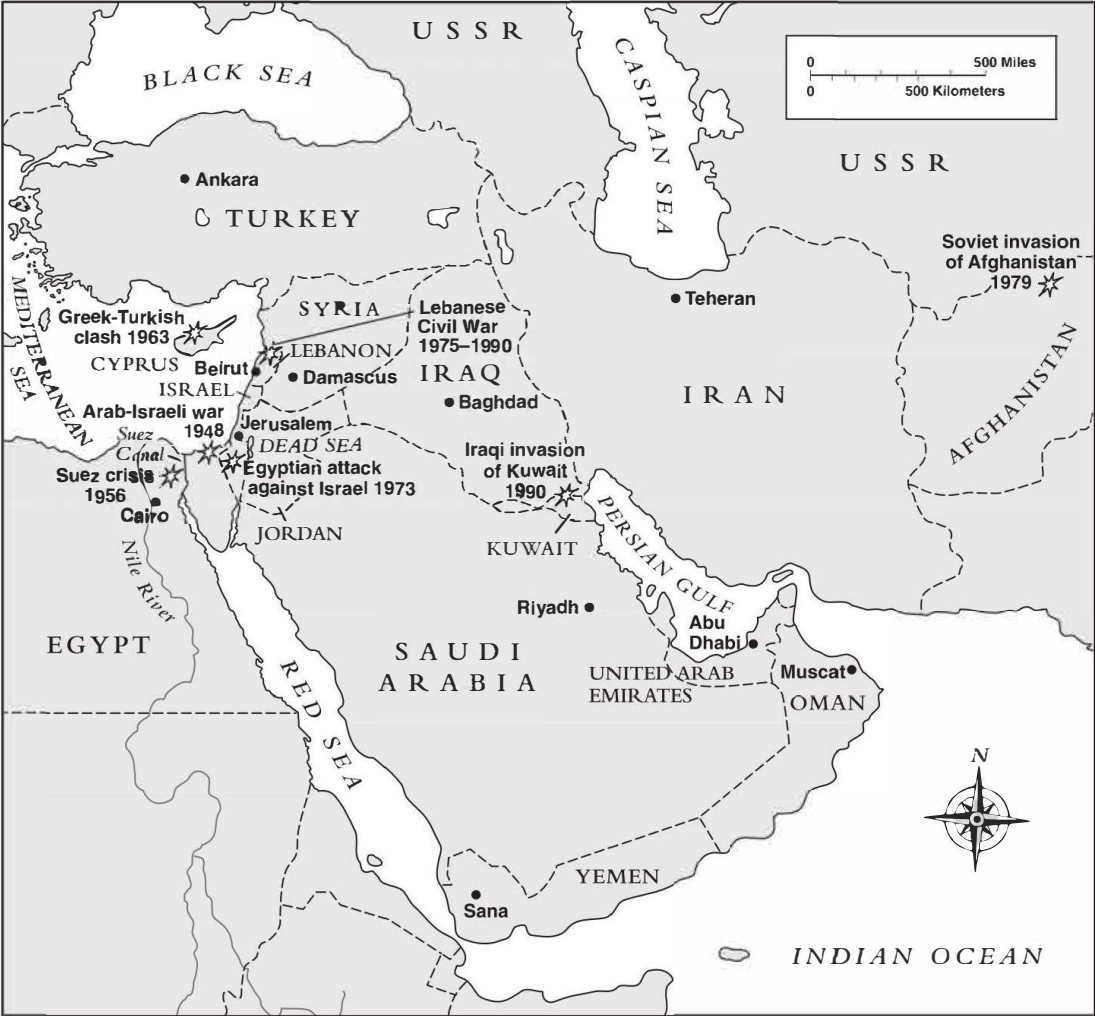
U.S.-Soviet Relations

For U.S. security, nothing was more crucial than U.S. diplomatic relations with its chief political and military rival, the Soviet Union. Throughout Eisenhower's presidency, the relations between the two superpowers fluctuated between periods of relative calm and extreme tension.

Spirit of Geneva After Stalin's death in 1953, Eisenhower called for a slowdown in the arms race and presented to the United Nations an *atoms for peace* plan. The Soviets also showed signs of wanting to reduce Cold War

tensions. They withdrew their troops from Austria (once that country had agreed to be neutral in the Cold War) and established peaceful relations with Greece and Turkey. By 1955, a desire for improved relations on both sides resulted in a summit meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, between Eisenhower and the new Soviet premier, Nikolai Bulganin. At this conference, the U.S. president proposed an “open skies” policy over each other’s territory—open to aerial photography by the opposing nation—in order to eliminate the chance of a surprise nuclear attack. The Soviets rejected the proposal. Nevertheless, the “spirit of Geneva,” as the press called it, produced the first thaw in the Cold War. Even more encouraging, from the U.S. point of view, was a speech by the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in early 1956 in which he denounced the crimes of Joseph Stalin and supported “peaceful coexistence” with the West.

MIDDLE EAST AREAS OF CONFLICT, 1948–1990



Hungarian Revolt The relaxation in the Cold War encouraged workers in East Germany and Poland to demand reforms from their Communist governments. In October 1956, a popular uprising in Hungary actually succeeded in overthrowing a government backed by Moscow. The new, more liberal leaders wanted to pull Hungary out of the Warsaw Pact, the Communist security organization. This was too much for the Kremlin, and Khrushchev sent in Soviet tanks to crush the freedom fighters and restore control over Hungary. The United States took no action in the crisis. Eisenhower feared that sending troops to aid the Hungarians would touch off a major war in Europe. In effect, by allowing Soviet tanks to roll into Hungary, the United States gave de facto recognition to the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and ended Dulles' talk of "liberating" this region. Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolt also ended the first thaw in the Cold War.

Sputnik Shock In 1957, the Soviet Union shocked the United States by launching the first satellites, *Sputnik I* and *Sputnik II*, into orbit around the earth. Suddenly, the technological leadership of the United States was open to question. To add to American embarrassment, U.S. rockets designed to duplicate the Soviet achievement failed repeatedly.

What was responsible for this scientific debacle? American schools became the ready target for criticism of their math and science instruction and failure to produce more scientists and engineers. In 1958, Congress responded with the National Defense and Education Act (NDEA), which authorized giving hundreds of millions in federal money to the schools for math, science, and foreign language education. Congress in 1958 also created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), to direct the U.S. efforts to build missiles and explore outer space. Billions were appropriated to compete with the Russians in the space race.

Fears of nuclear war were intensified by *Sputnik*, since the missiles that launched the satellites could also deliver thermonuclear warheads anywhere in the world in minutes, and there was no defense against them.

Second Berlin Crisis "We will bury capitalism," Khrushchev boasted. With new confidence and pride based on *Sputnik*, the Soviet leader pushed the Berlin issue in 1958 by giving the West six months to pull its troops out of West Berlin before turning over the city to the East Germans. The United States refused to yield. To defuse the crisis, Eisenhower invited Khrushchev to visit the United States in 1959. At the presidential retreat of Camp David in Maryland, the two agreed to put off the crisis and scheduled another summit conference in Paris for 1960.

U-2 Incident The friendly "spirit of Camp David" never had a chance to produce results. Two weeks before the planned meeting in Paris, the Russians shot down a high-altitude U.S. spy plane—the U-2—over the Soviet Union. The incident exposed a secret U.S. tactic for gaining information. After its

open-skies proposals had been rejected by the Soviets in 1955, the United States had decided to conduct regular spy flights over Soviet territory to find out about its enemy's missile program. Eisenhower took full responsibility for the flights—*after* they were exposed by the U-2 incident—but his honesty proved to be a diplomatic mistake. Khrushchev denounced the United States and walked out of the Paris summit to temporarily end the thaw in the Cold War.

Communism in Cuba

Perhaps more alarming than any other Cold War development during the Eisenhower years was the loss of Cuba to communism. A bearded revolutionary, Fidel Castro, overthrew the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. At first, no one knew whether Castro's politics would be better or worse than those of his ruthless predecessor. Once in power, however, Castro nationalized American-owned businesses and properties in Cuba. Eisenhower retaliated by cutting off U.S. trade with Cuba. Castro then turned to the Soviets for support. He also revealed that he was a Marxist and soon proved it by setting up a Communist totalitarian state. With communism only 90 miles off the shores of Florida, Eisenhower authorized the CIA to train anticommunist Cuban exiles to retake their island, but the decision to go ahead with the scheme was left up to the next president, Kennedy.

Eisenhower's Legacy

After leaving the White House, Eisenhower claimed credit for checking Communist aggression and keeping the peace without the loss of American lives in combat. He also started the long process of relaxing tensions with the Soviet Union. In 1958, he initiated the first arms limitations by voluntarily suspending above-ground testing of nuclear weapons.

“Military-Industrial Complex” In his farewell address as president, Eisenhower spoke out against the negative impact of the Cold War on U.S. society. He warned the nation to “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence . . . by the military-industrial complex.” If the outgoing president was right, the arms race was taking on a momentum and logic all its own. It seemed to some Americans in the 1960s that the United States was in danger of going down the path of ancient Rome by turning into a military, or imperial, state.

The Civil Rights Movement

While Eisenhower was concentrating on Cold War issues, events with revolutionary significance to race relations were developing within the United States.

Origins of the Movement

The baseball player Jackie Robinson had broken the color line in 1947 by being hired by the Brooklyn Dodgers as the first African American to play on a major league team since the 1880s. President Truman integrated the armed forces in 1948 and introduced civil rights legislation in Congress. These were the first well-publicized indications that race relations after World War II were changing. As the 1950s began, however, African Americans in the South were still by law segregated from whites in schools and in most public facilities. They were also kept from voting by poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and intimidation. Social segregation left most of them poorly educated, while economic discrimination kept them in a state of poverty.

Changing Demographics The origins of the modern civil rights movement can be traced back to the movement of millions of African Americans from the rural South to the urban centers of the South and the North. In the North, African Americans, who joined the Democrats during the New Deal, had a growing influence in party politics in the 1950s.

Changing Attitudes in the Cold War The Cold War also played an indirect role in changing both government policies and social attitudes. The U.S. reputation for freedom and democracy was competing against Communist ideology for the hearts and minds of the peoples of Africa and Asia. Against this global background, racial segregation and discrimination stood out as glaring wrongs that needed to be corrected. President Truman took one step in this direction by desegregation the military in 1948.

Desegregating the Schools

The NAACP had been working through the courts for decades trying to overturn the Supreme Court's 1896 decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which allowed segregation in "separate but equal" facilities. In the late 1940s, the NAACP won a series of cases involving higher education.

Brown Decision One of the great landmark cases in Supreme Court history was argued in the early 1950s by a team of NAACP lawyers led by Thurgood Marshall. In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, they argued that segregation of black children in the public schools was unconstitutional because it violated the 14th Amendment's guarantee of "equal protection of the laws." In May 1954, the Supreme Court agreed with Marshall and overturned the *Plessy* case. Writing for a unanimous Court, Chief Justice Earl Warren ruled that (1) "separate facilities are inherently unequal" and unconstitutional, and (2) school segregation should end with "all deliberate speed."

Resistance in the South Opposition to the *Brown* decision erupted throughout the South. To start with, 101 members of Congress signed the "Southern Manifesto" condemning the Supreme Court for a "clear abuse of judicial power." States fought the decision several ways, including the temporary closing of the public schools and setting up private schools. The Ku Klux Klan made a comeback, and violence against blacks increased. In Arkansas in

1956, Governor Orval Faubus used the state's National Guard to prevent nine African American students from entering Little Rock Central High School, as ordered by a federal court. President Eisenhower then intervened. While the president did not actively support desegregation or the Brown decision, he understood his constitutional duty to uphold federal authority. Eisenhower ordered federal troops to stand guard in Little Rock and protect black students. Resistance remained stubborn. In 1964, ten years after the Supreme Court decision, less than 2 percent of blacks in the South attended integrated schools.



Source: Marion Post Wolcott, Memphis, 1939. Library of Congress

Montgomery Bus Boycott

In 1955, as a Montgomery, Alabama, bus took on more white passengers, the driver ordered a middle-aged black woman to give up her seat to one of them. Rosa Parks refused and her arrest for violating the segregation law sparked a massive African American protest in the form of a boycott of the city buses. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., minister of the Baptist church where the boycott started, soon emerged as the inspirational leader of a nonviolent movement to end segregation. The protest touched off by Rosa Parks and the Montgomery boycott resulted in the Supreme Court ruling that segregation laws were unconstitutional. The boycott also sparked other civil rights protests that reshaped America over the coming decades.

Federal Laws

Signed into law by President Eisenhower, two civil rights laws of 1957 and 1960 were the first such laws to be enacted by the U.S. Congress since Reconstruction. They were modest in scope, providing for a permanent Civil Rights Commission and giving the Justice Department new powers to protect the voting rights of blacks. Despite this legislation, southern officials still used an arsenal of obstructive tactics to discourage African Americans from voting.

Nonviolent Protests

What the government would not do, the African American community did for itself. In 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which organized ministers and churches in the South to get behind the civil rights struggle. In February 1960, college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, started the sit-in movement after being refused service at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter. To call attention to the injustice of segregated facilities, students would deliberately invite arrest by sitting in restricted areas. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed a few months later to keep the movement organized. In the 1960s, African Americans used the sit-in tactic to integrate restaurants, hotels, buildings, libraries, pools, and transportation throughout the South.

The results of the boycotts, sit-ins, court rulings, and government responses to pressure marked a turning point in the civil rights movement. Progress was slow, however. In the 1960s, a growing impatience among many African Americans would be manifested in violent confrontations in the streets.

Immigration Issues in the Postwar Years

Congress dropped the bans on Chinese and other Asian immigrants and eliminated “race” as a barrier to naturalization, but the quota system remained in place until 1965. Puerto Ricans, as American citizens, could enter the United States without restrictions. However, Mexicans faced a choice of working under contract in the *braceros* program, entering as a regulated legal immigrant, or crossing the border as “illegals.” In the early 1950s, U.S. officials, responding to complaints from native-born workers and from Mexico, launched Operation Wetback, which forced an estimate 3.8 million people to return to Mexico. Mexicans migrants remaining in the United States often faced discrimination and exploitation by commercial farmers.

Popular Culture in the Fifties

Among white suburbanites, the 1950s were marked by similarities in social norms. Consensus about political issues and conformity in social behavior were safe harbors for Americans troubled by the foreign ideology of communism. At the same time, consensus and conformity were the hallmarks of a consumer-driven mass economy.

Consumer Culture and Conformity

Television, advertising, and the middle-class movement to the suburbs contributed mightily to the growing homogeneity of American culture.

Television Little more than a curiosity in the late 1940s, television suddenly became a center of family life in millions of American homes. By 1961, there were 55 million TV sets, about one for every 3.3 Americans. Television programming in the fifties was dominated by three national networks, which presented viewers with a bland menu of situation comedies, westerns, quiz shows, and professional sports. FCC chairman Newton Minnow criticized television as a “vast wasteland” and worried about the impact on children of a steady dose of five or more hours of daily viewing. Yet the culture portrayed on television—especially for third and fourth generations of white ethnic Americans—provided a common content for their common language.

Advertising In all the media (television, radio, newspapers, and magazines), aggressive advertising by name brands promoted common material wants, and the introduction of suburban shopping centers and the plastic credit card in the 1950s provided a quick means of satisfying them. The phenomenal proliferation of chains of fast food restaurants on the roadside was one measure of success for the new marketing techniques and standardized products as the nation turned from “mom and pop” stores to franchise operations.

Paperbacks and Records Despite television, Americans read more than ever. Paperback books, an innovation in the 1950s, were selling almost a million copies a day by 1960. Popular music was revolutionized by the mass marketing of inexpensive, long-playing (LP) record albums and stacks of 45 rpm records. Teenagers fell in love with rock-and-roll music, a blend of African American rhythm and blues with white country music, popularized by the gyrating Elvis Presley.

Corporate America In the business world, conglomerates with diversified holdings began to dominate such industries as food processing, hotels, transportation, insurance, and banking. For the first time in history, more American workers held white-collar jobs than blue-collar jobs. To work for one of *Fortune* magazine’s top 500 companies seemed to be the road to success. Large corporations of this era promoted teamwork and conformity, including a dress code for male workers of a dark business suit, white shirt, and a conservative tie. The social scientist William Whyte documented this loss of individuality in his book *The Organization Man* (1956).

Big unions became more powerful after the merger of the AF of L and the CIO in 1955. They also became more conservative, as blue-collar workers began to enjoy middle-class incomes.

For most Americans, conformity was a small price to pay for the new affluence of a home in the suburbs, a new automobile every two or three years, good schools for the children, and maybe a vacation at the recently opened Disneyland (1955) in California.

Religion Organized religions expanded dramatically after World War II with the building of thousands of new churches and synagogues. Will Herberg's book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955) commented on the new religious tolerance of the times and the lack of interest in doctrine, as religious membership became a source of both individual identity and socialization.

Women's Roles

The baby boom and running a home in the suburbs made homemaking a full-time job for millions of women. The traditional view of a woman's role as caring for home and children was reaffirmed in the mass media and in the best-selling self-help book, *Baby and Child Care* (1946) by Dr. Benjamin Spock.

At the same time, evidence of dissatisfaction was growing, especially among well-educated women of the middle class. More married women, especially as they reached middle age, entered the workforce. Yet male employers in the 1950s saw female workers primarily as wives and mothers, and women's lower wages reflected this attitude.

Social Critics

Not everybody approved of the social trends of the 1950s. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1958), Harvard sociologist David Riesman criticized the replacement of "inner-directed" individuals in society with "other-directed" conformists. In *The Affluent Society* (1958), economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the failure of wealthy Americans to address the need for increased social spending for the common good. (Galbraith's ideas were to influence the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the next decade.) Sociologist C. Wright Mills portrayed dehumanizing corporate worlds in *White Collar* (1951) and threats to freedom in *The Power Elite* (1956).

Novels Some of the most popular novelists of the 1950s wrote about the individual's struggle against conformity. J. D. Salinger provided a classic commentary on "phoniness" as viewed by a troubled teenager in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Joseph Heller satirized the stupidity of the military and war in *Catch-22* (1961).

"Beatniks" A group of rebellious writers and intellectuals made up the Beat Generation of the 1950s. Led by Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*, 1957) and poet Allen Ginsberg ("Howl," 1956), they advocated spontaneity, use of drugs, and rebellion against societal standards. The beatniks would become models for the youth rebellion of the 1960s.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: A SILENT GENERATION?

Among intellectuals, a commonly held view of the 1950s was that Americans had become complacent in their political outlook—a “silent generation” presided over by a grandfatherly and passive President Eisenhower. Liberal academics believed that McCarthyism had stopped any serious or critical discussion of the problems in American society. Eisenhower’s policies and their general acceptance by most voters seemed a bland consensus of ideas that would bother no one. Critics contrasted the seeming calm of the 1950s with the more “interesting” social and cultural revolution of the next decade.

Over time, historians have treated the 1950s with more respect. Research into the Eisenhower papers has revealed a president who used a hidden-hand approach to leadership. Behind the scenes, he was an active and decisive administrator who was in full command of his presidency. His domestic policies achieved sustained economic growth, and his foreign policy relaxed international tensions. Such accomplishments no longer looked boring to historians writing after decades of economic dislocations and stagnant or declining incomes.

Reflecting this more generous view of Eisenhower is William O’Neill’s *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945–1960* (1987). O’Neill argues that Eisenhower led a needed and largely successful economic and social postwar “reconstruction.” He and other historians emphasize that the 1950s prepared the way for both the liberal reforms of the 1960s and the conservative politics of the 1980s. Achievements of women, African Americans, and other minorities in a later era were made possible by changes in the fifties. Furthermore, the integration of Catholics, Jews, and other white ethnics into American society during the postwar years made it possible for Kennedy to be elected the first Irish Catholic president in 1960.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

<p>Domestic Politics (POL) elections of 1952, 1956 Dwight Eisenhower Adlai Stevenson Richard Nixon modern Republicanism Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) soil-bank program Highway Act (1956); interstate highway system</p> <p>“New Look” Foreign Policy (WOR) John Foster Dulles “brinksmanship” massive retaliation decolonization India, Pakistan, Indonesia Third World CIA, covert action Iranian overthrow</p> <p>US Policy in Asia (WOR) Korean armistice Indochina Ho Chi Minh Geneva Conference (1954) division of Vietnam domino theory Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (1954)</p>	<p>US Policy in Middle East (WOR) State of Israel (1948) Arab nationalism Suez Canal crisis (1956) Eisenhower Doctrine Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)</p> <p>US-Soviet Relations (WOR) atoms for peace “spirit of Geneva” open-skies Nikita Khrushchev peaceful coexistence Hungarian revolt Warsaw Pact Sputnik (1957) NDEA, NASA U-2 incident Cuba, Fidel Castro military-industrial complex</p> <p>Civil Rights in 1950s (POL, NAT) Jackie Robinson causes of movement NAACP desegregation Thurgood Marshall <i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i> (1954)</p>	<p>Earl Warren Southern Manifesto Little Rock crisis Rosa Parks Montgomery bus boycott Martin Luther King Jr. Civil Rights acts of 1957, 1960 Civil Rights Commission Southern Christian Leadership Conference nonviolent protest sit-in movement Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee immigration issues Operation Wetback</p> <p>1950’s Culture (CUL) homogeneity popular culture paperbacks television rock and roll consumer culture fast food credit cards conglomerates social critics <i>The Lonely Crowd</i> <i>The Affluent Society</i> <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> <i>Catch-22</i> beatniks</p>
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