Chapter 27: The Consumer Society: The 1950s

Overview
Unlike previous Americans, those in the 1950s lived in a time when consumer values dominated the American economy and culture. The “good life” was defined in economic terms and the dynamic economy provided more leisure and income. Above all, Americans were confident the good life was permanent and they enjoyed flashy cars, televisions, and an openness about sex. In some ways mass marketing and consumerism brought about a material conformity. In social areas, like religion and gender roles, conformity seemed to be the norm. However, America was still made up of dissimilar people. While some celebrated conformity, others reveled in unconformity. In the prosperous 1950s Americans demanded less of their government. They looked to Washington, and the president, for reassurance rather than bold action. Dwight D. Eisenhower dominated the decade. He was a comfortable moderate leader well suited to the times. The “Modern Republicans” appealed to a prosperous electorate but Eisenhower’s anticommunist foreign policy was not bland. Socially Americans were challenged by a rebellious youth culture, the alienated Beat movement, and a divisive civil rights struggle. What seemed so homogenous and prosperous and secure was in reality none of those things.

Key Topics The information in chapter 27 introduces your students to the following key topics:

- The creation of a consumer society based on economic prosperity, suburbanization, and new attitudes toward pleasure
- The survival of diversity and individuality despite the trend toward social conformity and homogeneity
- The cautious “Modern Republicanism” of President Dwight Eisenhower
- Challenges to the consumer society and mainstream politics from youth, beats, and African Americans

Chapter Outline
E. J. Korvettes
Living the Good Life
Economic Prosperity
The Suburban Dream

Feature: Where They Lived and Where They Worked: The New Suburbs: Levittown, New York
The Pursuit of Pleasure

A Homogeneous Society?
The Discovery of Conformity
The Decline of Class Differences
The Resurgence of Religion and Family
Maintaining Gender Roles
Persisting Racial Differences
The Survival of Diversity

The Eisenhower Era
“Ike” and 1950s America
“Modern Republicanism”
An Aggressive Approach to the Cold War
Avoiding War with the Communist Powers
Crises in the Third World

Challenges to the Consumer Society
Rebellious Youth
The Beat Movement
The Struggle for Civil Rights
An Uneasy Mood

Conclusion
Annotated chapter outline with review questions


Living the Good Life: Unlike previous Americans, those in the 1950s lived in a time when consumer values dominated the American economy and culture. The “good life” was defined in economic terms and the dynamic economy provided more leisure and income. Above all, Americans were confident the good life was permanent and they enjoyed flashy cars, televisions, and enjoyed an openness about sex.

- The 1950s was a decade of economic boom. Americans were eager to spend their money on goods that had been scarce during World War II. The federal government was also spending money. Defense spending and foreign aid stimulated the demand for American goods and services. Old industries, like steel and automobiles, grew alongside new industries, such as electronics, plastics, and computers. Jobs in the service sector also grew. As the economy grew, labor was relatively sanguine; workers seldom challenged employers as wages and benefits grew.
- For a growing number of Americans the “good life” was lived in the suburbs. For middle-class Americans the suburbs became a reality in the 1950s and suburbia was a critical part of the consumer economy. New building techniques, prefabricated parts, and low-priced uninhabited land made the explosion in the suburbs possible and a housing-shortage for newly married veterans stimulated growth.
- In order for prosperity to continue, Americans had to spend money on necessities and luxuries. Credit and credit cards were easier to obtain than ever before and they made acquiring the luxuries even easier to obtain. Debt rose from $5.7 million in 1945 to $56.1 billion in 1960. Discount stores, shopping malls, and fast-food restaurants were now common. No other commodity symbolized the era, however, than the automobile. The 1950s models featured lots of chrome and the old sedate dark blue and black of an earlier generation were replaced by colors. Accessories were powered. Everything was big. Cars came to symbolize the driver’s identity, especially a sexual identity. The sale of televisions boomed in the 1950s and televisions and the consumer society went hand in hand. Americans in the 1950s also enjoyed a new openness about sexuality. All of these changes represented a break from the world of the Great Depression with its sacrifices and scarcities.

Discuss the factors promoting consumerism in the years after World War II. Why were many Americans willing and able to participate in the consumer economy?

A Homogeneous Society?: In some ways mass marketing and consumerism brought about a material conformity. In social areas, like religion and gender roles, conformity seemed to be the norm. However, America was still made up of dissimilar people. While some celebrated conformity, others reveled in unconformity.

A variety of factors in Americans’ lives in the 1950s promoted homogeneity. The search for communists at home, a national consumer culture, giant corporations, even the suburbs and television seemed to encourage homogeneity or at the very least discourage individuality and diversity.

- Class differences declined in the 1950s and this, too, reinforced the sense of conformity. The elite of the industrial era, farmers, even working people were no longer identifiable or distinctive as an economic class. Some argued that the American worker had acquired middle-class buying habits and social values. However, the unified, classless society was just an illusion.
- Americans in the 1950s attended church more regularly. Church attendance doubled between 1945 and 1960. The religious revival of the 1950s can be explained from a number of perspectives. For some, church attendance was what one did because everyone else was doing it. The 1950s was also the decade of the family. The nuclear family was celebrated as the ideal. This was also the “baby boom.” American culture had become child-centered and child rearing had changed along with the times.
- The baby boom helped heighten pressure on men and women to conform to traditional gender roles. The stereotype was at odds with reality and American men and women got with the help dealing with the contradictions. However they did receive warnings not to deviate from gender stereotypes. Work place inequalities, such as pay, were the norm and were to be expected. Those who varied from the stereotypic norm faced condemnation.
- While ethnic differences among whites seemed to matter less in the 1950s racial differences still mattered a great deal. American society was still segregated and African Americans and Native Americans faced
systematic discrimination. The Hispanic population was rapidly growing. Despite wishes to the contrary, the United States remained a multiracial society. Segregation was the norm: Native Americans living on reservations were encouraged to move to cities and federal aid to reservations was cut off. Puerto Ricans migrated north to cities on the mainland and Mexicans immigrated in increasing numbers. The prosperity that white Americans enjoyed in the 1950s did not necessarily change the economic realities of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans. They faced different futures and lived in different conditions.

- Regional geographic differences across the nation ensured the survival of diversity in the 1950s. Americans relocated to the West to take advantage of a growing economy and jobs while others retired to Florida. Alaska and Hawaii became states in 1959. Popular music reflected the nation’s diversity. Ethnic musical styles continued alongside jazz and the blues and country. These genre had split into sub-groups each with a loyal following. A new genre, rock and roll, was born of a fusion of rhythm and blues and country music. American popular music was anything but homogeneous.

What forces promoted uniformity and conformity in 1950s America? Did the United States become a homogeneous society?

**The Eisenhower Era:** In the prosperous 1950s Americans demanded less of their government. They looked to Washington, and the president, for reassurance rather than bold action. Dwight D. Eisenhower dominated the decade. He was a comfortable moderate leader well suited to the times. The “Modern Republicans” appealed to a prosperous electorate but Eisenhower’s anticomunist foreign policy was not bland.

- Dwight D. Eisenhower, known affectionately as “Ike”, was well-suited to the times. Old enough to be wise but modern enough for the post war era, Eisenhower managed to reconcile old and new. He believed in harmonious teamwork and he was the quintessential “Organization Man.” His experiences in Europe during and after the war made him not only knowledgeable but committed to an activist international American foreign policy. Personally Ike was like everybody else. Eisenhower’s election campaign was moderate and conciliatory. His vice presidential running mate, Richard Nixon, was the aggressive one. The Republican ticket got 442 electoral votes, 55 percent of the popular vote. The Republicans also took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in twenty years.

- “Modern Republicanism” represented Eisenhower’s attempt to strike a balance between traditional Republican conservatism and Democratic liberalism. It reflected the American mood. Modern Republicanism supported limited government and balanced budgets but Eisenhower did not support dismantling the New Deal and Fair Deal legislation which provided for Social Security and farm subsidies. Eisenhower’s moderation was popular with American voters. In 1956 Eisenhower and Nixon were reelected with 58 percent of the popular vote and 457 electoral votes.

- President Eisenhower continued the same domestic anticomunist policy as Harry Truman. He refused to publicly criticize Senator McCarthy’s tactics or stay the Rosenberg’s execution. He denied renewal of J. Robert Oppenheimer’s security clearance to work on top-secret nuclear projects. Internationally Eisenhower talked about not just containing communist expansion but rolling it back. Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles crafted a “New Look” for the American military. The New Look called for the increase in the nation’s nuclear arsenal with new long-range bombers, missiles, and nuclear powered submarines. Eisenhower used the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to carry out secret activities against the nation’s enemies and aided pro-American regimes.

- As he promised during the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower traveled to Korea before his inauguration. A cease-fire agreement was signed in July 1953. Although North and South Korea remained divided, it was, as Eisenhower said, “an acceptable solution.” Keeping the war from escalating kept the United States from having to confront the Communist Chinese military. In the fall of 1956, the Eisenhower administration avoided another conflict with the other communist nation, the Soviet Union, this time in Hungary. The Cold War was really an economic and political fight. Josef Stalin’s successor Nikita Krushchev signaled a desire for “peaceful coexistence.”

- Even though their primary concern was Western Europe, the Eisenhower administration was also concerned with Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. These non-industrial, non-communist nations, generally referred to as the “Third World” nations, were often plagued by poverty, violence, and civil war as they struggled to break free from colonial rule. The United States stood ready to counter the
Soviet’s moves using aid, trade, and financial alliances and he encouraged closer military ties. Eisenhower inherited a policy of financial aid to the French fighting to hold on to Vietnam and its Southeast Asian colonies. Eisenhower was fearful of what a communist victory would do to foreign trade but he was more fearful of what a communist victory would mean in other areas of the world. He used the domino metaphor to describe what would happen if that first domino, Vietnam, fell. Japan and Australia could be caught up in the disaster. Despite vast amounts of American aid, in the end the French could not defeat the Viet Minh, who were led by the communist Ho Chi Minh, and aided by the communist Chinese. Millions of dollars and military advisers went to South Vietnam. For the time being, the first domino in Southeast Asia had been shored up. Another crisis flared up in Egypt in 1954 when the outspoken Arab nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser seized power. In retaliation for the United States withdrawing promised aid, Nasser seized the Suez Canal. In retaliation to Nasser’s move, Britain, France, and Israel moved against Egypt. Eisenhower feared the Soviets would use the opportunity to move in and he threatened economic sanctions. Krushchev threatened to launch rockets in defense of the Egyptians. Britain, France, and Israel withdrew. By the end of Eisenhower’s term, the United States was a party in NATO, SEATO, and CENTO. The United States was willing to go anywhere to halt the spread of communism.

Why was Dwight Eisenhower such a popular public figure in the 1950s? How did he support consumerism?

How did President Eisenhower try to confront the threat of communism around the world? Was his approach to the Cold War successful?

**Challenges to the Consumer Society:** Socially Americans were challenged by a rebellious youth culture, the alienated Beat movement, and a divisive civil rights struggle. What seemed so homogenous and prosperous and secure was in reality none of those things.

- The consumer society of the 1950s, television networks, movie studios, record labels, and comic book companies catered to a new group of consumers: teenagers. This distinctive youth culture was based on such things as rock and roll, customized cars, comic books, and pre-marital sexual exploration and many adults were troubled. Although it seemed as if the teens were rebelling, many in the youth culture exaggerated rather than rejected the values of the adult, consumer society. Teen idols like Elvis Presley were outwardly different in dress and hairstyle but he, too, bought a mansion in the suburbs and drove a pink Cadillac. Even though some believed American teens were corrupted or brainwashed or were unwitting participants in a communist conspiracy, they were in truth members of a powerfully influential consumer society. Because they had money to spend, the mass media responded accordingly.

- But there was another group, a bit older and fewer in number, who were alienated from the society of the 1950s. They were part of the Beat Movement, which emerged in New York City in the late 1940s. They searched for ways to get beyond their sense of alienation. The Beat generation explored the world beyond their culture: they explored their sexuality, experimented with mind-altering drugs, and delved into Far Eastern religions. The beats were also drawn to African American culture, especially the music of a new generation of jazz musicians.

- By the 1950s change also came to the civil rights movement. Black Americans were inspired by gains they had made in the 1940s as well as NAACP court victories over discrimination. By 1951, with precedent setting cases in place, the NAACP’s special counsel Thurgood Marshall, launched a direct assault on Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). The case, known as Brown v. Board of Education (1954), challenged the segregation of public schools arguing that it was unconstitutional under the 14th amendment. The Court unanimously agreed. In the south, whites refused to acknowledge the Court’s decision. In some areas the threats to Jim Crow resulted in violence. Black Americans, on the other hand, were energized and took the battle to the streets — challenging segregated transportation. Rosa Parks and others in Montgomery, Alabama, boycotted the city bus system. The boycott lasted almost a year and resulted in another Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated bussing. It also resulted in making the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. known beyond his congregation. Local activism and federal intervention combined to tear down Jim Crow laws in the South. The battle was neither easy nor swift. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused to allow black students to enroll at Little Rock’s Central High School. Little Rock created a dilemma for President Eisenhower. He neither supported the Brown
decision nor advocated integration but his inaction made federal government look weak. In the end, he
sent troops to Little Rock to protect the nine black high school students.

- All of these changes from the norm, youth culture, the beat movement, and the civil rights struggle
contribution to an uneasy mood in America in the late 1950s. Some intellectual writers claimed that
consumerism had created a crass society, others that Americans were manipulated by advertising. It
seemed that the consumer society was not above corruption and scandals involving record companies
paying radio stations to play their records or that popular television quiz shows were rigged corroborated
their fears. They also worried whether or not the United States could really meet the challenges of the
Cold War. When the Soviets launched the first man-made satellite into orbit in October 1957 a new wave
of fear swept the nation. Americans felt vulnerable and they questioned the quality of education their
children received. Congress passed legislation to aid and promote science, math, and foreign language
skills and offered financial aid for students to attend school. American attempts to equal Sputnik failed
and by the end of the decade President Eisenhower seemed old and out dated. By the end of his term, his
cautions about the growing influence of the “military-industrial complex” on the economy fed the fears.
His caution was a stunning admission that the Cold War had transformed the nation’s political economy
and that the transformation might have negative consequences. By the end of the decade, many changes
had challenged the old beliefs about conformity.

Compare the youth culture, the Beats, and the civil rights movement of the 1950s. Did any of them want
radical change for the United States?

Feature: Where They Lived and Where They Worked: The New Suburbs: Levittown, New York:
Levittown, New York, illustrated the dual realities of the 1950s. It featured conformity and social
uniformity in housing designs and urban planning but it also reflected Americans’ sense of individualism as home
owners added their own touches to their homes to try and personalize them and set them apart from their neighbor’s
home.

Conclusion: Consumerism and the post-war affluence allowed Americans to break with their past lifestyles.
The United States seemed to be a harmonious and safe place to live. Not all Americans saw this as a positive move
and Americans still faced racial divisions.

Making links to other ideas Using the maps and websites, in addition to your prepared lectures and
other assignments, can give you more resources to enable your students to see that history is much more than
memorizing names and dates. You will find that the websites are even more comprehensive and adaptable than
described and because they have been collected here in one volume you have a world of information no further away
than the click of your mouse. If you are new to the web's opportunities, you will be pleasantly surprised at the
breadth and depth of the information available in these sites.

Map 01. List the member nations of SEATO. Which nations have a bilateral treaty with the United States?
Map 02. List the member nations of NATO and CENTO.
Map 03. What does this map illustrate?

Web connections and resources Consider using these websites to supplement your students’
reading and analytical skills. The sites were chosen because of their relevance to the material in the chapter -- not
just to mirror it but to provide additional materials and perspectives. Questions from the student study guide have
been included so that you can use or amend them to your own needs. Your students may find it insightful for you to
guide them through the site as you help them develop research strategies.


The tumult of the 1960s never would have happened without the tension of the 1950s. Mistrust and
rebellion later on were partly a response to the loss of a very deep trust. Later generations of Americans would
wonder why the earlier generations seemed to believe everything they were told by churches, government, private
industry, or anyone with a voice of authority. Yet trust made sense to many people who had lived through the Great
Depression and World War II; they knew from experience that the country had survived due to concerted action,
coordinated by government and relying on individual cooperation. Was the "disturbing uniformity" of the consumer society completely uniform, though? Darrell Huff's book, How to Lie With Statistics (1954), was one indication that critical thinking WAS going on. What does it tell you about that generation of Americans?

“Levittown: Documents of an Ideal Suburb”  http://www.vic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown.html
Discover the cultural history of Levittown through contemporary photographs of the suburb and its inhabitants, construction of the houses, family life, suburb-centered recreation.

“MLK Page”  www.umich.edu/politics/mlk
Consult this informative web site for timelines of the American Civil Rights Movement and learn more about pivotal events such as Brown v. Board of Education and the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott.

“Rebel Poets of the 1950s”  http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/rebels/poets.htm
Part of an exhibit on the Beat Movement, this site interprets the beats and their impact. Also, see paintings and photographs of Beat poets.
1. Compare the backgrounds of the members of the four schools of rebel poets. Are their attitudes similar or does a school attract a poet with a similar attitude as that of the group?

“NSC68”  http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/nsc68-1/nsc-68.htm
This site features a National Security Council report ordered by President Eisenhower that examines U.S. programs for national defense, the risks of nuclear war, and Soviet preparedness.
1. According to the author of NSC-68, what kind of relationship can the United States and the Soviet Union expect to have? How should the United States prepare itself for the future world? How should the American government prepare the American people for this future?

Analytical reading  Your students may need more experience analyzing a short reading passage so that he or she can determine its component parts. They may need help identifying primary and supporting information as well as the author’s analysis. The analytical reading passages and the questions from the student study guide have been duplicated in the instructor’s manual for your use. Your students may need direction and encouragement in using them.

Americans were troubled, too, by signs of corruption in the consumer society. In 1958, they learned that record companies had paid Alan Freed and other disc jockeys to play particular records on the radio. This “payola” scandal destroyed Freed’s career and damaged the reputation of rock and roll. The same year, Americans were shocked by revelations that contestants on popular TV quiz shows had secretly been given the answers to questions in advance. Some of the shows went off the air. Charles Van Doren, a college professor much admired for his success on the show “Twenty-One,” was convicted of perjury and lost his teaching job. In the process, television lost some of its innocent appeal.

While Americans worried whether the consumer society was corrupt, they also had to wonder whether it could meet the challenge of the Cold War. In October 1957, the Soviet Union sent Sputnik, the world’s first satellite, into orbit around the earth. This unexpected accomplishment set off a wave of fear in the United States. If the Soviets could send up a satellite, they could be ahead in nuclear weapons and economic growth, too. Americans felt suddenly more vulnerable.

1. Television and radio were part of the consumer society. In what ways did corruption in radio and TV shake Americans’ confidence in the consumer society?
2. Why did the Soviets’ success with Sputnik make Americans insecure about their own technological abilities? What did this say about their ability to win the Cold War?
Writing  The questions or writing prompts from the student study guide have been duplicated here for your use. These writing topics make good lecture topics especially if you help your students see the development of the idea in lecture format before they refine the idea in their writing assignments.

1. Discuss the evidence supporting the trade unions leader’s assertion that “American labor never had it so good” as in the 1950s.
2. What did the author mean when writing “By attracting Hispanic workers, the economy even promoted diversity.”
3. In what ways did the variety of popular music call into question the reality of homogeniety?
4. Describe President Eisenhower’s commitment to fighting the expansion of communism. How and where were his confrontations staged? What events in the Middle East exacerbated the Cold War?
5. Despite so many Americans’ desire to embrace conformity, many did not feel the same. In what ways did Americans prove their displeasure with conformity? Why were so many of the nonconformists young?
6. Discuss the issues in Brown v Board of Education. Why was the Plessy v Ferguson decision an issue in the Brown case?
7. Why was the Brown decision referred to as “a second emancipation proclamation?”
8. The Montgomery bus boycott “was the beginning of a flame that would go across America.” What did that flame represent? How was it carried from one place to another?

Lecture Strategies  Ultimately the lecture is where you impart, or profess, your knowledge for the benefit of your students. These strategies were designed around the textbook and if your classroom strategy is to use the organization of the text to organize your course content, these lecture ideas may prove helpful. However, if you lecture around themes please see the section entitled “Thematic Lecture Topics.” You may find that you are more comfortable with and your students are more responsive to a combination of the two.

If your students are familiar with and knowledgeable about American society during the Great Depression and World War II then they will more easily understand the forces evident in the 1950s. Conformity, mass consumption and consumerism, and the celebration of youth reflect the hopes for the future and the fears of the past and, as topics, should be examined. Have your students examine the social and political morés of middle class America and the suburbs. You might have your students think about life in the 1950s while reading (or listening) to the words of Malvina Reynolds’s song “Little Boxes” (1962) about the “ticky tacky little houses that all look just the same.”

Consider, too, the decade’s prosperity and the source of that prosperity. Ask your students to explain why there was no real post World War II economic recession. Ask them if that prosperity had any effect on the social values of the time.

Conformity as a topic will also allow you to look at race and gender relations of the decade and then you can look at those who chose nonconformity. You may want to have your students see the 1950s as a manifestation of the tension that existed between conforming and nonconforming groups and how that tension was dealt with (or not). Help your students try to see why an older pre-World War II generation was so frightened by the Beat Generation and the popularization of the notion of rebellious youth. If you have laid a good foundation with your lectures on the Cold War, some of these fears will be easy for them to understand.

Additionally, the politics of the 1950s, as symbolized by Eisenhower and Modern Republicanism, is also an interesting reflection of the times. Eisenhower’s actions which further globalized the Cold War are important for the consequences of his actions and decisions.

In the midst of the 1950s the civil rights battles are increasingly difficult for Americans to ignore. Use this opportunity to discuss the history of the civil rights movement. There is much more here than just Brown v Board of Education (1954), Rosa Parks, and the integration of Little Rock High School. Help your students see the correlation between the gains made by African Americans during the war and their post war aspirations and prosperity which combine to create an environment in which social change is desirable and necessary and white middle class Americans’ search for conformity so that they can protect their post war prosperity.

Penguin Classics


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Rosa Parks, the woman, the myth, and her place in the civil rights movement, is the subject of Douglas Brinkley's short biography. This is not just the story of one woman’s life and work in the civil rights movement, it is the story of the time. It is an excellent biography of both the life and the times.