CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: AMERICA AT MIDCENTURY, 1952–1963

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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
* Post-World War II prosperity
* Suburban life: ideal and reality
* The emergence of youth culture
* Television, mass culture, and their critics
* Foreign policy in the Eisenhower years
* John F. Kennedy and the promise of a New Frontier

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: POPULAR MUSIC IN MEMPHIS
Elvis Presley excited a Memphis, Tennessee crowd by singing rock ‘n’ roll. The new music combined country and blues achieving a cultural integration that prefaced the political and social integration of the civil rights movement. Memphis was a rapidly growing segregated city with whites and blacks of various classes. Elvis, who moved to the city in 1949 and lived in a housing project, listened to both white and black music. Sam Phillips, a white producer who recorded black artists, recognized that Elvis could sing with the emotional intensity and power of black performers. Elvis blended black styles of music with white
styles to help create a new style of music. Rock ‘n’ roll united teenagers and gave them the feeling that it was their music (and misunderstood by adults). The vignette illustrates how music was helping to break down racial barriers and build a community of teenagers.

AMERICAN SOCIETY AT MID-CENTURY In the post-WWII era, Americans seemed to be enjoying the good life in an affluent society. President Dwight D. Eisenhower inspired confidence and adopted a middle-of-the-road style. He ran the government in a businesslike, cooperative manner, pursuing policies that helped private companies and tolerating practices that left scars on the environment. He also rejected calls from conservatives to dismantle the welfare state. Although his presidency included two brief recessions, he presided over an extensive increase in real wages.

The federal government helped subsidize this prosperity by providing loans for homes and assisting the growth of suburbs. The federal government paid for veterans’ college education, built an interstate highway system, and, following the Russian launch of a satellite, spent millions on education. Suburban life strengthened the domestic ideal and provided a model of the efficient, patient suburban wife for television. Suburbs often replicated urban neighborhood settlement patterns becoming ethnic or class enclaves.

In the Mid-1950s, trade unions reached a peak of membership and influence, especially in the Democratic Party. The merger of the AFL and the CIO marked the zenith of the unions. Little effort was made however to unionize unorganized workers and union membership declined after 1955.

The postwar baby boom was paralleled by a tremendous expansion of higher education, assisted by extensive federal aid. Colleges accepted the values of corporate culture with 20 percent of all graduates majoring in business. Students tried to conform to the corporate values.

YOUTH CULTURE The word “teenager” became common in the American language after WWII. Young people’s numbers grew and with that growth came an increase in purchasing power. Traditional sources of adult authority—the marketplace, schools, mass media, etc.—reinforced the notion of teenagers as a special community. Structural changes in the media transformed radio into a music-dominated medium. In addition, small independent record labels promoted black rhythm-and-blues artists, many of whom “crossed over” to white audiences. Established record companies offered toned-down white “cover” versions that frequently outsold the originals. Alan Freed, a white Cleveland disc jockey, promoted black artists and set the stage for the first major white performer who could play genuine rock ‘n’ roll, Elvis Presley. Ironically teenagers were torn between their identification with youth culture and the desire to become adults as quickly as possible. Many adult observers saw rock-‘n’-roll as unleashing youthful passions in a dangerous way. It was closely linked to juvenile delinquency, a subject of highly publicized congressional hearings.

MASS CULTURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS Although TV was a radical change from
radio, its development as a mass medium was smoothed out by the prior existence of radio. The high cost of TV changed advertising. Unlike radio, sponsors left production to others. Early TV replicated radio formats including situation comedies set among urban ethnic families. By the late 1950s, situation comedies were set among idealized, white suburban families. Prime-time shows avoided references to contemporary political issues and avoided being tainted with Communist influence. TV did bring important congressional hearings before mass audiences and by 1952, slick ads began to shape presidential campaigns.

The new mass culture prompted a growing chorus of conservative and radical critics. Some bemoaned the great “Middlebrow Culture” that was driving out high culture. These criticisms ignored the vitality that could be found within key elements of mass culture. The “Beats” articulated some of the sharpest dissents from conformity. They celebrated spontaneity, jazz, open sexuality, drug use, and American outcasts. They foreshadowed the mass youth rebellion of the 1960s.

THE COLD WAR CONTINUED Eisenhower favored a reliance on American nuclear superiority in favor of more expensive conventional forces. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called for a policy of rollback that would reverse communist gains. This “new look” for American foreign policy was in conflict with Eisenhower’s cautious approach. Ike refused to intervene to aid the anti-Communist uprising in Hungary. After Stalin died, new Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev raised hopes for a warming of relations. Following some steps toward a more peaceful coexistence, the thaw quickly froze when the Soviets shot down an American spy plane. Even after the launching of Sputnik, Ike sounded a cautious voice, though military budgets kept growing.

Eisenhower favored covert action. The CIA sponsored paramilitary operations in the Third World when newly emerging nations sought to recover resources from foreign investors. American interventions in Iran overthrew the government and helped secure oil concessions. A CIA-sponsored coup overthrew the government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala when it tried to initiate a policy of land reform. The United States provided France with massive military aid in its struggle to hold on to Vietnam. Ike rejected the use of American ground troops, but believed that if Vietnam fell the rest of Southeast Asia would fall like dominoes. Vietnam was temporarily divided at the 17th parallel and a former Japanese collaborator, Ngo Dinh Diem was installed as leader in the South. Diem canceled elections to unite the country and a full-scale civil war resulted. A growing public anxiety over nuclear weapons led to small but well-publicized protests. Ike expressed his own doubts when he warned the nation of the growing “military-industrial complex.”

JOHN F. KENNEDY AND THE NEW FRONTIER JFK was a young man from a wealthy Irish-Catholic family. He pursed a successful political career, becoming a Senator from Massachusetts. After winning the Democratic nomination, Kennedy won a narrow victory over Republican vice-president Richard Nixon. His inauguration brought out a bevy of intellectuals who heard him inspire a sense of sacrifice among young Americans. Although JFK proposed a liberal agenda, conservatives controlled Congress
and prevented much of it from passing. He did establish the Peace Corps and support
efforts to improve employment equality for women. He used fiscal policy to stimulate the
economy. JFK committed the country to expanding its manned space program.

In his three years as president, JFK’s foreign policy shifted from containment to
 easing tensions. He increased defense appropriations by almost one-third. He sent
 Special Forces to battle third world guerillas, including communist forces in Southeast
 Asia. JFK supported the Alliance for Progress, ostensibly a Marshall Plan for Latin
 America. The plan did little to help the poor and JFK did nothing to challenge the power
 of anti-Communist dictators. The plan had been spurred by the Cuban Revolution that
 brought Fidel Castro to power in 1959. Ike cut off aid when Castro began a land reform
 program and later the United States severed diplomatic relations. JFK implemented Ike’s
 plan for a CIA-backed invasion by Cuban exiles. The plan failed, leading Castro to ask
 Khrushchev for help. The Soviets began shipping missiles to Cuba. JFK rejected calls for
 an immediate attack but ordered a blockade on Cuba. The Soviets backed down and
 withdrew the missiles and JFK pledged not to invade Cuba. He seemed chastened and
 began to try to improve cooperation with the Soviets.

The November 22, 1963 assassination of Kennedy made him a martyr and raised
 questions about what he would have achieved, had he lived.

CONCLUSION America in 1963 still enjoyed the postwar economic boom, but
 Kennedy’s election had symbolized the changing of generations.

Lecture Suggestions

1. To set up 1950s culture draw on what the students already think they know. You
 might call this lecture, “The World of ‘Leave it to Beaver.’” Nickelodeon and
 Family Channel have been broadcasting TV programs from the 1950s either in
 jest or as presumed models for the way families are supposed to be. In any event,
 juxtapose the reality of the way things really were with the image TV presented.
 (See the Out of Class Activity for more suggestions on this point.)

2. One way of getting a handle on Eisenhower-era foreign policy is to explain
 the consequences of the end of colonialism. Draw two circles on the board—draw a
 horizontal line through one (representing east/west). Make the connection between
 the Cold War assumptions discussed in the previous chapter and the policy that
 emerges in the Eisenhower era. Ask students who is east and who is west. (The
 point is that east-west conflicts were conflicts presumably between the forces of
 Communism and the forces of democracy.) Then draw a vertical line through the
 other (representing north/south). Explain that the conflicts the U.S. had to cope with
 were north/south in nature—conflicts with former western colonies. The basic
 assumption of the text is that the United States took what were essentially north-
 south conflicts and tried to turn them into east-west conflicts.

3. Many college students believe that JFK was one of the greatest presidents of all
time. That opinion is not shared by most historians, certainly not the authors of the text. Explain how JFK’s popular image was shaped and how it differs from most historians’ judgment. A close examination of what JFK did (as opposed to the image that was created around him, particularly after he died) should help clarify the Kennedy record.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How would you evaluate the Eisenhower presidency? Was he a good, fair, or poor president? Why would you make that evaluation?

2. The text argues that the booming economy of the 1950s was, in fact, heavily subsidized by the federal government. Do you buy that interpretation? How could we be subsidizing the economy at the same time we were battling Communism?

3. Why did teenage whites find rock n' roll so compelling? Why did adult authorities find it so shocking?

4. During the Eisenhower years the United States began extensive intervention in the Third world. Why did we do it? What assumptions led us to those decisions? Can you make a connection between these assumptions and the policy of containment discussed in the previous chapter? Was there a difference between our official explanations and the underlying motives?

5. How would you evaluate the Kennedy presidency? Was he a good, fair, or poor president? Why would you make that evaluation?

**Out of Class Activity**

As suggested above, students have rather uncritically accepted the TV shows of the late 1950s as accurately depicting American life in that era. Students could evaluate those shows (which are widely broadcast on Nickelodeon and Family Channel and are also available on videotape) against the reality as portrayed in the text. Students might also want to check out the first few chapters in Stephanie Coontz’s *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 1992) for additional information. A discussion on what’s in those shows—and (equally significant) what’s not in them—should get fairly lively.

**If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject**


**Audio-Visual Aids**
The PBS series “Making Sense of the Sixties” opens with an episode that effectively sets up the middle-class culture of the 1950s and links it to the fear of Communism. (Color, 60 minutes, 1991)

“That Rhythm Those Blues” From PBS “American Experience Series.” Focuses on black rhythm and blues singers Charles Brown and Ruth Brown and shows how the music spread and was changed as whites took control of it. (Color, 60 minutes, 1988)