AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY
1950s
A29 7.4.4
To what extent did the decade of the 1950s deserve its reputation as an age of political, social, and cultural conformity?

“Conservatism, Complacency, and Contentment” OR “Anxiety, Alienation, and Social Unrest”
AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY

- **Post-WWII Recession (1946)**
  - Reduced government spending
  - high inflation
    - pent-up demand,
    - available savings & income
    - elimination of government rationing & price controls
  - labor unrest
AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY: Economic Prosperity

- **General economic expansion 1945-1972**
  - GNP grew 250% between 1945 and 1960: $200B to over $500B
  - Low Unemployment - 5% or lower through 50s
  - Low inflation – during Eisenhower admin, averaged 1.5% per year
  - Rapid Growth Incomes – more than tripled 1945-1960
    - Average family in 1955 had double the income of comparable family during 1920s

- **Highest standard of living in world**

- **Dominant economy in world**
AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY: Economic Prosperity

- **G.I. Bill of Rights** (Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944)
  - Education
    - job training
    - college
  - Loans for homes and businesses

### G.I. Bill & College Enrollment

![Graph showing enrollment in colleges from 1948 to 1966](chart.png)

- **Percentage of Total, Number, and Average Age of Entering**
  - 9% of 700,000 (29)
  - 18% of 1,400,000 (26)
  - 29% of 2,200,000 (25)
  - 44% of 3,500,000 (28)

- On the farm | Pre-college | College | On the job

- **Legend**
  - Total
  - Male
  - Veteran
AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY: Economic Prosperity

- Regional Growth: The Sunbelt
  - Warmer climate, lower taxes, lower labor costs
  - Military spending

Population Change, 1950-1960

Increase in population
- Over 50%
- 20%-50%
- 10%-20%
- Under 10%
Decrease in population
- Under 10%

(National U.S. population increase: 18.5%)
CHANGES IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & MEDICINE

1951 -- First IBM (commercial) Mainframe Computer

1952 -- Hydrogen Bomb Test

1953 -- DNA Structure Discovered

1954 -- Polio Vaccine Tested – Jonas Salk

1957 -- First Commercial U. S. Nuclear Power Plant

1958 -- NASA Created

- Automation: 1947-1957 - factory workers decreased by 4.3%, eliminating 1.5 million blue-collar jobs.
CONSENSUS & CONFORMITY

SUBURBIA AND MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICA IN THE 1950s
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: Politics

◆ Election of 1952: Dwight D. Eisenhower vs. Adlai Stevenson
  ◆ Ike won: 34 million to 27 million popular votes; 442 to 89 electoral votes.

◆ “Modern Republicanism”
  ◆ Fiscal Conservative: sound business principles, Reduce federal spending, balance budget and cut taxes
  ◆ Social Moderate: maintain existing social and economic legislation
  ◆ Tried to avoid partisan conflicts

◆ Federal Highway Act (1956)
AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY: Society

- baby boom
- population grew 20%
  1950s (150M ⇒ 180M)
Fertility rate is the annual number of live births per 1000 women aged 15–44 years

The Baby Boom in Historical Context
## AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY: Growth of Suburbs

### SHIFTS IN POPULATION DISTRIBUTION, 1940-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1970</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Cities</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburbs</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Areas/</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Towns</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

U. S. Bureau of the Census.

1. [1940](#) - [Central cities: 31.6%, Suburbs: 19.5%, Rural areas and small towns: 48.9%](#)
2. [1950](#) - [Central cities: 32.3%, Suburbs: 23.8%, Rural areas and small towns: 43.9%](#)
3. [1960](#) - [Central cities: 32.6%, Suburbs: 30.7%, Rural areas and small towns: 36.7%](#)
AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY: Growth of Suburbs

REASONS FOR THE GROWTH OF SUBURBS

 ún Growth of families ("baby boom")
ún Home-ownership became more affordable
  ún Low-interest mortgage loans
    ún gov’t-backed & interest tax-deductible
  ún Mass-produced subdivisions
ún Expressways – facilitated commuting
ún Decline in inner city housing stock
  ún Also: congestion, pollution
ún Race – “white flight”
AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY: Suburbia

- **Mass-produced housing on the edge of cities**
  - **Levittown** – 17,000 mass-produced, low-priced homes
    - 1949 → William Levitt produced 150 houses per week.
    - $7,990 or $60/month with no down payment.

- **“The American Dream”**

- **Effect on inner cities:** increasingly poor and racially divided
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: SUBURBIA

◆ Car culture
  ◆ Car registrations: 1945 - 25,000,000; 1960 - 60,000,000
  ◆ 2-car families double from 1951-1958
◆ Federal Highway Act (1956)
  ◆ (National Defense and) Interstate Highway System
◆ Result: a more homogeneous nation

1958 Pink Cadillac
Automobiles symbolize a new lifestyle
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: Car Culture

America became a more homogeneous nation because of the automobile.

First McDonald’s (1955)

Drive-In Movies

Howard Johnson’s
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: Television

- Television arrived in the 50s
  - 1946 - 7,000 TV sets in U.S.; 1960 - 46,000,000 (1 per 3.3 persons)

- “vast wasteland”

- Common mass culture
  - Suburban middle class

RADIO AND TELEVISION OWNERSHIP, 1940–1960
Suburban Living: The Typical TV Suburban Families

The Donna Reed Show 1958-1966

Leave It to Beaver 1957-1963

Father Knows Best 1954-1958

The Ozzie & Harriet Show 1952-1966
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: Consumer Culture

- Advertising (tv, radio, magazines) name brands
- Suburban shopping centers
- Credit Cards
- Rise of Franchises (McDonalds)
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: Corporate America

- **Consolidation**
  - 1960 - 600 corporations (1/2% of all U.S. cos.) 53% of corporate income
  - Conglomerates (food processing, hotels, transportation, insurance, banking)

- **More Americans in white collar than blue collar jobs**

- **Corporate culture - “The Company Man”**

Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: Organized Labor

- **Taft-Hartley Act** (Labor Management Relations Act of 1947)
- **Unions – big, powerful and more conservative**
  - Merger AFL and CIO in 1955
  - Blue collar workers - enjoying middle-class incomes and benefits
  - Goal: preserve and extend compensation

![Labor Union Membership, 1920-1992](chart.png)
Traditional gender roles reaffirmed
- baby boom
- home in suburbs
- mass media
- Dr. Benjamin Spock’s best-selling book *Baby and Child Care* (1946)
CONSENSUS AND CONFORMITY: Gender Roles & Women

- At end of WWII, many women left the work force
  - “pink collar” jobs
  - Paid less - seen primarily as wives and mothers
- Yet by end of decade 1/3 women held jobs
  - More married women joined workforce, especially as they reached middle age
Other Americas
"Fallout shelter built by Louis Severance adjacent to his home near Akron, Mich., includes a special ventilation and escape hatch, an entrance to his basement, tiny kitchen, running water, sanitary facilities, and a sleeping and living area for the family of four. The shelter cost about $1,000. It has a 10-inch reinforced concrete ceiling with thick earth cover and concrete walls."
OTHER AMERICAS: SOCIAL CRITICS

- William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (1956)
  - conformity

- David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1958)
  - “inner-directed” individuals → “other-directed” conformists.

  - failure to address significant social issues and common good (would influence JFK and LBJ)

- Michael Harrington, *The Other America*
  - rural poverty, inner cities
OTHER AMERICAS: NONCONFORMISTS & CULTURAL REBELS

- **Teen Culture developed (free time, spending money)**
  - “teenager”
  - consumerism
    - By 1956, 13 million teens with $7 billion to spend a year.

- **Rock and Roll**
  - Elvis Presley

- **James Dean, “Rebel without a Cause”**

- **“juvenile delinquency”**

- **J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye***
Beginnings of Rock Music

The Dominoes

Alan Freed

Bill Haley & the Comets

Elvis

(Michael Barson Collection/Past Perfect)
OTHER AMERICAS: NONCONFORMISTS & CULTURAL REBELS

◆ “Beats” – “Beatniks”
  ◆ Allen Ginsberg – “Howl” (1956)
  ◆ Jack Kerouac, On the Road (1957)
Class Discussion Topic:

The postwar era witnessed tremendous economic growth and rising social contentment and conformity. Yet in the midst of such increasing affluence and comfortable domesticity, social critics expressed a growing sense of unease with American culture in the 1950s.

Assess the validity of the above statement and explain how the decade of the 1950s laid the groundwork for the social and political turbulence of the 1960s.
 SOURCES

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- Brinkley, *American History: A Survey* 10e/11e [Instructors Resource CD]
- Kennedy, *American Pageant* 13e [History Companion CD]
- http://www.billhaley.com/
- *National Archives and Records Administration*
- *Susan Pojer, “American Culture in the 50s” PPT*