

Chapter 38- The Eisenhower Era

1952-1960

The Advent of Eisenhower

- American people found themselves in the 1950s dug into the Cold War abroad and dangerously divided at home over the explosive issues of communist subversion and civil rights
- Democratic prospects in the president election of 1952 were blighted by the military deadlock in Korea, Truman's clash with MacArthur, war-bred inflation, and whiffs of scandal
- Democrats nominated Adlai E. Stevenson (governor of Illinois) while the Republicans enthusiastically chose General Dwight D. Eisenhower (and paired him with Richard Nixon)
- Eisenhower was already the most popular American of his time (television politics, credentials)
- Eisenhower left the rough campaigning to Nixon, but reports surfaced of a secret "slush fund" that Nixon had tapped while in Senate and he made a "Checkers speech" that saved him
- Nixon and Eisenhower both embraced the new technology of the black-and-white television
- This new medium was a threat to the historic role of political parties (political communication)
- Eisenhower cracked the solid South wide open and ensured GOP control of the new Congress

"Ike" Takes Command

- Eisenhower visited Korea in December 1952 but could not budge the peace negotiations; only after Eisenhower threatened to use atomic weapons seven months later was an armistice finally signed but was repeatedly violated in the succeeding decades
- The fighting lasted three years and about fifty-four thousand Americans died and more than a million Asians were dead but only Korea remained divided at the thirty-eighth parallel
- Eisenhower had a leadership style that projected sincerity, fairness, and optimism; his greatest asset was his enjoyment of the affection and respect of the citizenry
- His immense popularity was used for a good cause (social harmony and civil rights)

The Rise and Fall of Joseph McCarthy

- One of the first problems Eisenhower faced was the swelling popularity and swaggering power of anticommunist crusader Senator Joseph R. McCarthy who crashed into the limelight with the charge that scores of known communists worked in the State Department (failed to prove)
- McCarthy's Republican colleagues realized the usefulness of this kind of attack on the Democratic administration; McCarthy saw the red hand of Moscow everywhere

- McCarthy flourished in the Cold War atmosphere of suspicion and fear; he was surely the most ruthless red-hunter and damaged the American traditions of fair play and free speech
- The careers of countless officials, writers, and actors were ruined after he named them
- Opinion polls showed that a majority of the American people approved of McCarthy's crusade
- Eisenhower, in effect, allowed him to control personnel policy at the State Department
- McCarthy crossed the line by attacking the US army; soldiers fought back in televised hearings and the Senate formally condemned him for "conduct unbecoming a member" ("McCarthyism")

Eisenhower Republicanism at Home

- General Eisenhower entered White House in 1953 pledging his administration to a philosophy of "dynamic conservatism"—balance the federal budget and guard the Republic from socialism
- Eisenhower supported the transfer of control over offshore oil fields from the federal gov't to the states; he tried to curb the TVA by encouraging private companies to compete
- In Operation Wetback, as many as 1 million Mexicans were apprehended and returned to Mexico due to pressure from Mexican gov't over illegal Mexican immigration (*braceros*)
- Eisenhower sought to cancel the tribal preservation policies of "Indian New Deal"—proposed to terminate the tribes as legal entities and revert to assimilationist goals of the Dawes Act of 1887
- Eisenhower pragmatically accepted and legitimated many New Deal-like programs
- Ike backed the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, a \$27 billion plan to build 42,000 miles of highways; benefits to industries, exacerbated air quality, and proved disastrous to cities
- Eisenhower balanced the budget only three times in his eight years in office and in 1959 he incurred the biggest peacetime deficit in American history (sharp downturn of 1957-1958 that left more than 5 million workers, economic troubles helped the revive the Democrats)

A New Look in Foreign Policy

- Secretary of state John Foster Dulles promised not merely to stem the red tide but to "roll back" its gains and "liberate captive peoples" (balance budget by cutting military spending)
- Dulles and the "policy of boldness" in 1954—Eisenhower would relegate army and navy to back seat and built up an air fleet of superbombers ("massive retaliation")
- Advantages thought to be paralyzing nuclear impact and its cheaper price tag (Chinese)
- After Stalin's death in 1953, the new Soviet premier, Khrushchev rejected Ike's proposals for peace at the Geneva summit conference in 1955 ("open skies" proposal shot down)

- The “new look” in foreign policy proved illusory; in 1956 the Hungarians rose up against their Soviet masters and appealed in vain to the US for aid, but Moscow reasserted its domination

The Vietnam Nightmare

- Europe thanks to the Marshall Plan and NATO seemed reasonably secure by the early 1950s but not East Asia; nationalists in Indochina; Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh wanted independence
- Cold War events caused many of the Asian leaders to become increasingly communist while US became increasingly anticommunist (American financing French colonial war with Indochina)
- French garrison stuck in Dienbienphu in March 1954 and after the US held back, Dienbienphu fell to the nationalists and conference at Geneva halved Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel
- Victorious Ho Chi Minh in the North; pro-Western government under Ngo Dinh Diem
- Eisenhower promised economic and military aid to the autocratic Diem regime; aid slowed

A False Lull in Europe

- The US had backed the French in Indochina to win French approval of a plan to rearm West Germany; Germans were welcomed into the NATO fold in 1955; in the same year, the Eastern European countries and the Soviets signed the Warsaw Pact—the red military counterweight
- Eisenhower negotiated arms-control agreements with Moscow; Soviets left Austria
- Khrushchev denounced the bloody excesses of Joseph Stalin—hope for the future
- Events late in 1956 ended the post-Geneva lull with the Hungarian rebellion (US admit refugees)

Menaces in the Middle East

- Increasing fears of Soviet penetration into the oil-rich Middle East prompted act in Washington
- The American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) engineered a coup in 1953 that installed the shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi (because he embraced the West, no nationalization)
- In the Suez crisis, President Nasser of Egypt was seeking funds to build an immense dam on the upper Nile with America and Britain giving money but Nasser floated toward communists
- Dulles withdrew the dam offer and Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal (Western oil supply)
- Secretary Dulles labored to ward off armed intervention but the US, France, and Britain staged a joint assault on Egypt late in October 1956—Eisenhower refused to give allies any oil
- Domestic American reserves had been rapidly depleted since 1940 (oil powers in Middle East)

- The Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957 pledged US military and economic aid to Middle Eastern nations threatened by communist aggression—real threat was nationalism (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC, and stranglehold on Western economies)

Round Two for Ike

- The election of 1956 was a replay of the 1952 contest with President Eisenhower pitted once more against Adlai Stevenson; Eisenhower won a victory but still lost both houses of Congress
- A drastic labor-reform bill in 1959 grew out of recurrent strikes in critical industries and scandalous revelations of gangsterism in unionist high echelons (Teamsters Union)
- Teamster chief Dave Beck was sentenced to prison for embezzlement and James R. Hoffa was elected to be his successor; the Senate discovered \$10 million stolen and Hoffa disappeared
- Eisenhower using a dramatic television appeal convinced Congress in 1959 to pass the Landrum-Griffin Act that was designed to bring labor leaders to book for financial shenanigans and to prevent bullying tactics—antilaborites also forced into bill to be against “secondary boycotts”

The Race with the Soviets into Space

- Soviet scientists astounded the world on October 4, 1957, by lofting into orbit around the globe a spaceship (*Sputnik I*) and a month later they sent *Sputnik II* carrying a dog
- This amazing scientific breakthrough shattered American self-confidence and America had seemingly taken a back seat in scientific achievement; fear of Soviet missile superiority
- Eisenhower regarded the Soviets as not a threat while the Republicans blamed the Truman administration for not supporting a missile program but still the US was well advanced on a broad scientific front, including color television while the Soviets had gone all out for rocketry
- “Rocket fever” swept the nation and Eisenhower established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and directed billions of dollars to missile development
- After humiliating failures, in February 1958 the US managed to put into orbit a satellite (2.5 lbs)
- The Sputnik success led to a critical comparison of the American education system with that of the Soviet Union; a strong move now developed in the US to replace unnecessary subjects
- In 1958 the National Defense and Education Act (NDEA) authorized \$887 million in loans to needy college students and in grants for the improvement of teaching the sciences and languages

The Continuing Cold War

- Race toward nuclear annihilation continued unabated; The Soviets, after completing an intensive series of exceptionally “dirty” tests, proclaimed a suspension in March 1958 and

urged the Western world to follow; In October 1958, the US halted underground and atmospheric testing

- In July 1958 Egyptian and communist plottings threatened to engulf Lebanon and after the president called for aid under the Eisenhower Doctrine, the US restored order with troops
- Khrushchev was eager to meet with Eisenhower to pave the way for a “summit conference” with Western leaders and the president invited him to America in 1959 to speak before the UN
- After a meeting at Camp David the spirit evaporated when the Paris “summit conference” in May 1960 was a fiasco because an American U-2 spy plane was shot down in Russia
- The concord of Camp David was replaced with the grapes of wrath (Eisenhower took blame)

Cuba’s Castroism Spells Communism

- Latin Americans resented the Marshall Plan and was annoyed at US’ habit of intervening in Latin American affairs—CIA-directed coup that ousted a leftist gov’t in Guatemala in 1954
- Washington had supported Fulgencio Batista in Cuba but when Fidel Castro engineered a revolution early in 1959, he began to take American property for a land-distribution program
- The US cut off heavy imports of Cuban sugar while Castro made Cuba a satellite of Moscow
- Americans talked seriously of invoking the Monroe Doctrine and Khrushchev threatened US
- The Cuban revolution, which Castro sought to “export” to his neighbors, brought other significant responses; in Costa Rica in 1960 the US induced the Organization of American States to condemn communist infiltration into the Americas and President Eisenhower proposed a “Marshall Plan” for Latin America with an initial authorization of \$500 million (too late)

Kennedy Challenges Nixon for the Presidency

- As Republicans approached the presidential campaign of 1960, Vice President Nixon was their heir apparent; he had defended American democracy in a “kitchen debate” with Khrushchev
- Nixon was nominated and his running mate was patrician Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.
- The Democratic race for the presidential nomination started as a free-for-all and John F. Kennedy won with a slight lead over Senator Lyndon B. Johnson (call for potential greatness)

The Presidential Issues of 1960

- Senator Kennedy was a Roman Catholic and artists revived the ancient charges about the Pope’s controlling the White House; Kennedy’s Catholicism aroused misgivings in the Bible Belt South
- Kennedy charged that the Soviets had gained on America in prestige and power while Nixon was forced to defend the dying administration and television may well have tipped the scales

- Many viewers found Kennedy's glamour and vitality far more appealing than Nixon's tired and pallid appearance on four nationally televised debates—Kennedy barely won in the popular vote
- The Democrats swept both houses of Congress by wide margins and John Fitzgerald Kennedy became the youngest man to date and the first Catholic to be elected president

An Old General Fades Away

- President Eisenhower continued to enjoy extraordinary popularity to the final curtain
- During Eisenhower's last years the Twenty-second Amendment, ratified in 1951, prevented reelection after two terms; Eisenhower had exerted unusual control over the legislative branch vetoing a total of 169 times and only twice was his no overridden by the required two-thirds vote
- America was fabulously prosperous in the Eisenhower years and the US now had 50 states
- Eisenhower as president mounted no moral crusade for civil rights (greatest failing) and he had exercised wise restraint in his use of military power and had guided foreign policy towards peace

Changing Economic Patterns

- The post-World War II economic boom wrought wondrous changes in American society in the 1950s; prosperity triggered a fabulous surge in home construction (renters to homeowners)
- Science and technology drove economic growth—the transistor in 1948 sparked a revolution in electronics and computers, which were massive machines with hundreds of wires at first
- Computer giant International Business Machines (IBM) expanded, becoming the prototype of the "high-tech" corporation in the dawning "information age" (personal computers, calculators)
- Aerospace industries grew in 1950s thanks to buildup in Air Command and to passenger airlines
- In 1957 the Boeing Company brought out the first large passenger jet, the "707"
- A sort of revolution was marked in 1956 when "white-collar" workers for the first time outnumbered "Blue-collar" workers, signaling the passage from an industrial to a postindustrial era
- Union membership peaked in 1954 (34%) and then went into a steady decline
- The surge in white-collar employment opened special opportunities for women; most women returned to the conventional female roles as wives and mothers and a "cult of domesticity" emerged in popular culture to celebrate those eternal feminine functions (television programs)
- Of some 40 million new jobs created in the three decades after 1950, more than 30 million were in clerical and service work; women filled the huge majority of these new positions

- Exploding employment opportunities for women in the 1950s unleashed urgent questions about family life and about traditional definitions of gender differences for women and men
- Feminist Betty Friedan gave focus and fuel to women's feelings in 1963 when she published *The Feminine Mystique*, feminist protest literature that launched the modern women's movement
- Many women working for wages were frustrated with leading an "unfeminine" life (cult of d.)

Consumer Culture in the Fifties

- The 1950s witnessed a huge expansion of the middle class and the blossoming of a consumer culture—plastic credit card in 1950, first McDonald's in 1954, Disneyland in 1955
- These innovations, easy credit, "fast-food" production, and new forms of recreation, were harbingers of an emerging new lifestyle of leisure and affluence that was in full bloom by 1960
- Crucial to the development of that lifestyle was the rapid rise of the new technology of television
- Attendance at movies sank, more broadcasting stations, most families by 1960 had television sets
- "Televangelists" took to the airwaves to spread the Christian gospel; television catalyzed the commercialization of professional sports and sports reflected the shift in population toward W/S
- The NY Giants moved to SF, the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to LA, new westward movement
- Popular music was dramatically transformed in the fifties and the chief revolutionary was Elvis Presley who fused black rhythm/blues with white country styles to form rock and roll
- Listening and dancing to Elvis Presley became the times and Presley was a sort of high priest
- Movie star Marilyn Monroe with her smile and hips helped to popularize and commercialize new standards of sensuous sexuality as well as *Playboy* magazine, first published in 1955
- Many critics lamented the implication of this new consumerist lifestyle
- Harvard sociologist David Riesman portrayed the postwar generation as a pack of conformists in *The Lonely Crowd*; Harvard economist John Galbraith questioned the relation between wealth and public good in *The Affluent Society* (social spending should match private purchasing)
- Sociologist Daniel Bell found even deeper paradoxes of prosperity; the "consumer ethic" might undermine the "work ethic" and thus destroy capitalism's very productive capacity
- Collusion at their highest levels of the "military-industrial complex" was the subject of *The Power Elite*, an influential piece of modern muckraking by radical socialist C. Wright Mills

The Life in the Mind of Postwar America

- In fiction writing some of the prewar realists continued to ply their trade, notably Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*; John Steinbeck persisted in graphic portrayals of American society, such as *East of Eden*; WW II did not inspire much literary outpouring
- As time passed, realistic writing fell from favor; authors tended increasingly to write about war in fantastic and even psychedelic prose (*Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut, *Catch-22*, Heller)
- The dilemmas created by the new mobility and John Updike and John Cheever explored the affluence of American life; Louis Auchincloss wrote about upper class New Yorkers, Gore Vidal
- Poets were often highly critical about the character of American life; Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman—writing poetry seemed to be a dangerous pursuit in modern America
- Tennessee Williams wrote a series of searing dramas about psychological misfits struggling to hold themselves together (*A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*)
- Arthur Miller brought to the stage searching probes of American values including *The Crucible*
- Lorraine Hansberry with *A Raisin in the Sun*; Richard Wright's *Native Son*, James Baldwin
- The South boasted a literary renaissance led by William Faulkner (Nobel recipient in 1950)
- Especially bountiful was the harvest of books by Jewish novelists (J.D. Salinger and *Catcher in the Rye*, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Isaac Singer, E.L. Doctorow)