

### **The History of the 1950s**

The 1950s in the United States were a decade marked by the post-World War II economic boom, the dawn of the Cold War with Russia and the Civil Rights movement. “*America at this moment*,” said the former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1945, “*stands at the summit of the world*.” During the 1950s, it was easy to see what Churchill meant. The United States was the world’s strongest military power. Its economy was booming, and the fruits of this prosperity, new cars, suburban houses and other consumer goods, were available to more people than ever before. The 1950s, however, were also an era of great conflict. For example, the nascent (newly born) civil rights movement and the crusade against communism at home and abroad, exposed the underlying divisions in American society.

#### **The Postwar Booms:**

Historians use the word “boom” to describe a lot of things about the 1950s: the booming economy, the booming suburbs and most of all the so-called “baby boom”. This boom began in 1948, when a record number of babies—3.4 million—were born in the United States. About 4 million babies were born each year during the 1950s. In all, by the time the baby boom finally tapered off in 1964, there were almost 77 million “baby boomers.”

After World War 2 ended, many Americans were eager to have children because they were confident that the future held nothing but peace and prosperity. In many ways, they were right. Between 1945 and 1960, the gross national product more than doubled, growing from \$200 billion to more than \$500 billion, kicking off “*the Golden Age of American Capitalism*”. Much of this increase came from government spending. This included the construction of interstate highways and schools, the distribution of veterans’ benefits and most of all the increase in military spending on goods like airplanes and new technologies like computers. All of this contributed to the decade’s record economic growth. Rates of unemployment and inflation were low, and wages were high. Middle-class people had more money to spend than ever and, because the

variety and availability of consumer goods expanded along with the economy, they also had more things to buy.

### **The Suburbs:**

Beginning in the years following WW2, the baby boom and the suburban boom went hand in hand. Almost as soon as World War II ended, developers such as William Levitt (whose "Levittowns" in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania would become the most famous symbols of suburban life in the 1950s) began to buy land on the outskirts of cities and used mass production techniques to build modest, inexpensive tract houses there. The G.I. Bill subsidized low-cost mortgages for returning soldiers, which meant that it was often cheaper to buy one of these suburban houses than it was to rent an apartment in the city.

These houses were perfect for young families—they had informal "family rooms," open floor plans and backyards—and so suburban developments earned nicknames like "Fertility Valley" and "The Rabbit Hutch." However, they were often not so perfect for the women who lived in them nor the families of colour and different faiths who were denied them. The various booms of the 1950s had a particularly confining effect on many American women. Advice books and magazine articles ("*Don't Be Afraid to Marry Young*," "*Cooking to Me Is Poetry*," "*Femininity Begins at Home*") urged women to leave the workforce and embrace their roles as wives and mothers. The idea that a woman's most important job was to bear and rear children was hardly a new one, but it began to generate a great deal of dissatisfaction among many women who yearned for more options in their lives. In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, women's rights advocate Betty Friedan argued that the suburbs were "*burying women alive*". This dissatisfaction, in turn, contributed to the rebirth of the feminist movement in the 1960s.

### **The Civil Rights Movement:**

A growing group of Americans spoke out against inequality and injustice during the 1950s. African Americans had been fighting against racial discrimination for centuries; during the 1950s, however, the struggle against racism and segregation

entered the mainstream of American life. For example, in 1954, in the landmark Brown v Board of Education case, the Supreme Court declared that "separate educational facilities" for black children were "inherently unequal." This ruling was the first nail in Jim Crow's coffin\*\*.

\*\* The origin of the phrase "Jim Crow" is attributed to a song & dance character created by a White actor wearing "blackface" in 1828. It became a derogatory name for Blacks in the 1830s and sadly remains so today.

Many Southern whites resisted the Brown ruling. They withdrew their children from public schools and enrolled them in all-white "segregation academies," and they continued to use violence and intimidation to prevent blacks from asserting their rights. (Some might argue that that disgustingly continues today). In 1956, more than 100 Southern congressmen, led by Governor George Wallace, signed a "Southern Manifesto" declaring that they would do all they could to defend segregation.

Despite these efforts, a new civil rights movement was born. In December 1955, a Montgomery, Alabama activist named Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white person. Her arrest sparked a 13-month boycott of the city's buses by its black citizens, which only ended when the bus companies stopped discriminating against African American passengers. Acts of "*nonviolent resistance*" like the boycott helped shape the civil rights movement of the next decade.

#### **The Cold War:**

The tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, known as the Cold War, was another defining element of the 1950s. After World War II, Western leaders began to worry that the USSR had what one American diplomat called "*expansive tendencies*"; moreover, they believed that the spread of communism anywhere, threatened democracy and capitalism everywhere. As a result, communism needed to be "*contained*", by diplomacy, by threats or by force. This idea shaped American foreign policy for decades.

