

The 1950's - from history.com - <http://www.history.com/topics/1950s>

“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. However, the 1950s were also an era of great conflict. For example, the nascent 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 1946, 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 boom finally tapered off in 1964, there were almost 77 million “baby boomers.”

After [World War II](#) 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. Much of this increase came from government spending: 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 contributed to the decade's 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.

MOVING TO THE SUBURBS

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 use 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. In fact, the 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 women who yearned for a more fulfilling life. (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.

Many Southern whites resisted the Brown ruling. They withdrew their children from public schools and enrolled them in all-white “segregation academies,” and they used violence and intimidation to prevent blacks from asserting their rights. In 1956, more than 100 Southern congressmen even signed a “Southern Manifesto” declaring that they would do all they could to defend segregation.

Despite these efforts, a new movement was born. In December 1955, a Montgomery activist named [Rosa Parks](#) was arrested for refusing to give 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.

It shaped domestic policy as well. Many people in the United States worried that communists, or “subversives,” could destroy American society from the inside as well as from the outside. Between 1945 and 1952, Congress held 84 hearings designed to put an end to “un-American activities” in the federal government, in universities and public schools and even in Hollywood. These hearings did not uncover many treasonous activities—or even many communists—but it did not matter: Tens of thousands of Americans lost their jobs, as well as their families and friends, in the anti-communist “Red Scare” of the 1950s.

SHAPING THE '60S

The booming prosperity of the 1950s helped to create a widespread sense of stability, contentment and consensus in the United States. However, that consensus was a fragile one, and it splintered for good during the tumultuous 1960s.