

28 The Suburban Era

1945–1963

Just as the United States raced the Soviet Union in a quest for atomic weapons, so the “Big Three” automakers of the 1950s (GM, Ford and Chrysler) sought to outdo one another in producing sleek, jet-age-styled cars. This suburban family shows off its 1959 Mercury Monterey.



>> An American Story

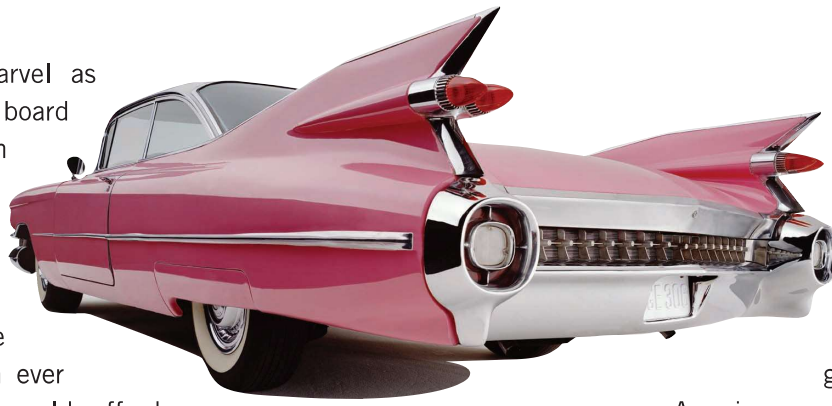
DYNAMIC OBSOLESCENCE (THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF HARLEY EARL)

The company that epitomized the corporate culture of the 1950s was General Motors. GM executives sought to blend in rather than to stand out. They chose their suits in drab colors—dark blue, dark gray, or light gray—to increase their anonymity. Not head car designer Harley Earl. Earl brought a touch of Hollywood into the world of corporate bureaucrats. He had a closet filled with colorful suits.

His staff would marvel as he headed off to a board meeting dressed in white linen with a dark blue shirt and blue suede shoes.

Mr. Earl—no one who worked for him ever called him Harley—could afford to be a maverick. He created the cars that brought customers into GM showrooms across the country. Before he came to Detroit, engineering sold cars. Advertising stressed mechanical virtues—the steady ride, reliable brakes, or, perhaps, power steering. Earl made style the distinctive feature. Unlike the boxy look other designs favored, an Earl car was low and sleek, suggesting motion even when the car stood still. No feature stood out more distinctively than the fins he first put on the 1948 Cadillac. By the mid-1950s jet planes inspired Earl to design ever-more-outrageous fins, complemented by huge, shiny chrome grills and ornaments. These features served no functional purpose. Some critics dismissed Earl's designs as jukeboxes on wheels.

Earl and GM did not care. Design sold cars. "It gave [customers] an extra receipt for their money in the form of visible prestige marking for an expensive car," Earl said. The "Big Three" auto manufacturers—General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler—raced one another to redesign their annual models, the more outrageous the better. Earl once joked, "I'd put smokestacks right in the middle of the sons of bitches if I thought I could sell more cars." The goal was not a better car but what Earl



▲The monstrous tail fins of the 1959 Cadillac.

called "dynamic obsolescence," or simply change for change's sake. "The 1957 Ford was great," its designer remarked, "but right away we had to bury it and start another." Even though the mechanics of cars changed little from year to year, dynamic obsolescence persuaded Americans in the 1950s to buy new cars in record numbers.

Fins, roadside motels, "gaseterias," drive-in burger huts, interstate highways, shopping centers, and, of course, suburbs—all these were part of a culture of mobility in the 1950s. Americans continued their exodus from rural areas to cities and from cities to the suburbs. African Americans left the South, heading for industrial centers in the Northeast, in the Midwest, and on the West Coast. Mexican Americans concentrated in southwestern cities, while Puerto Ricans came largely to New York. And for Americans in the Snow Belt, the climate of the West and South (at least when civilized by air conditioning) made the Sun Belt attractive.

The mobility was social, too. As the economy continued to expand, the size of the American middle class grew. Labor unions negotiated wage and benefits packages that

moved blue-collar workers into middle-income brackets. In an era of prosperity and peace, some commentators began to speak of a **consensus**—a general agreement in

American culture, based on values of the broad middle class. In a positive light, consensus reflected the agreement among most Americans about fundamental democratic values. Most citizens embraced

consensus point of view generally shared by a group, institution, or even a culture.

the material benefits of prosperity as evidence of the virtue of "the American way." And they opposed the spread of communism abroad.

But consensus had its dark side. Critics worried that too strong a consensus bred a mindless conformity. Were Americans becoming too homogenized? Was there a depressing sameness in the material goods they owned, in the places they lived, and in the values they held? The baby boomers born into this era seldom agonized over such issues. In the White House, President Eisenhower radiated a comforting sense that the affairs of the nation and the world were in capable hands. That left teenagers free to worry about what really mattered: a first date, a first kiss, a first job, a first choice for college, and whether or not to "go all the way" in the back seat of one of Harley Earl's fin-swept Buicks. <<

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THE RISE OF THE SUBURBS

Suburban growth accelerated sharply at the end of World War II. During the 1950s suburbs grew 40 times faster than cities, so that by 1960 half of the American people lived in them. The return of prosperity brought a baby boom and a need for new housing. Automobiles made the suburbs accessible. But the spurt in suburban growth took its toll on the cities, which suffered as the middle class fled urban areas. Many urban businesses and industries joined the exodus as well.

A Boom in Babies and in Housing >> The Great Depression caused many couples to delay beginning a family. In the 1930s birthrates had reached their low point in American history, about 18 to 19 per thousand. As prosperity returned during the war, birthrates began to rise. By 1952 they had passed 25 per thousand to reach one of the highest fertility rates in the world. New brides were also younger, which translated into increased fertility. Americans chose to have larger families, as the number with three children tripled and those with four or more quadrupled. “Just imagine how much these extra people, these new markets, will absorb—in food, in clothing, in gadgets, in housing, in services,” one journalist predicted.

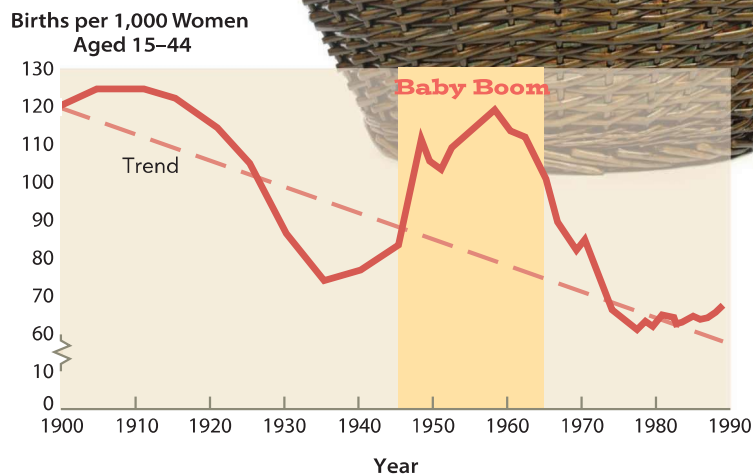
Historians and demographers have been hard-pressed to explain this extraordinary population bulge. It was not limited to the United States. In several other industrialized nations fertility rates also

soared, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and West Germany prime among them. Yet the long-term trend in American fertility rates was downward, as it was in other industrialized nations. Fertility rates peaked in Australia and New Zealand in 1961 and, three years later, in Great Britain and West Germany. Hence the baby boom stands as an anomaly, one that remains hard to explain.

Whatever factors contributed to the baby boom, it had both immediate and long-term consequences for American society. For one, the boom in marriage and families created a need for housing. At war's end, 5 million families lived in cramped apartments or even dark basements. With the help of the GI Bill and rising incomes, the chance to own a house rather than rent became a reality for over half of American families. And it was the suburbs that offered the kind of residence most Americans idealized: a detached single-family house with a lawn.

In the 1940s inexpensive suburban housing became synonymous with the name of real estate developer William Levitt. From building houses for war workers, Levitt learned how to use mass-production techniques. In 1947 he began construction of a 17,000-house community in the New York City suburb of Hempstead. Buoyed by his success, Levitt later built developments in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and Willingboro, New Jersey.

The typical early Levitt house was a “Cape Codder.” It boasted a living room, a kitchen, a bath, and two bedrooms on the ground floor and an expansion attic, all for \$7,990. None of the houses had custom details, insulation, or any features that complicated construction. “The reason we have it so good in this country,” Levitt said, “is that we can produce lots of



THE U.S. BIRTHRATE, 1900–1990

Despite periods of rapid rise and fall, the nation's birthrate has shown a steady downward trend. The Depression years marked an even sharper decline as financially strapped couples deferred child rearing. Younger marriages and postwar prosperity triggered the baby boom, but in general, affluence encourages lower birthrates.

things at low prices through mass production.” Uniformity in house style extended to behavior as well. Levitt discouraged owners from changing colors or adding distinctive features to the house or yard. Buyers promised to cut the grass each week of the summer and not to hang out wash on weekends.

Suburbs and Cities Transformed >> Single-family houses with spacious lawns required plenty of open land, unlike the row houses built side by side in earlier suburban developments. That meant Levitt and other builders chose vacant areas outside major urban centers. With the new houses farther from factories, offices, and jobs, the automobile became more indispensable than ever.

As population shifted to suburbs, traffic choked old country roads. To ease congestion the Eisenhower administration proposed a 20-year plan to build a massive interstate highway system. In rallying support, Eisenhower addressed cold war fears as well, arguing that the new system would help cities evacuate in

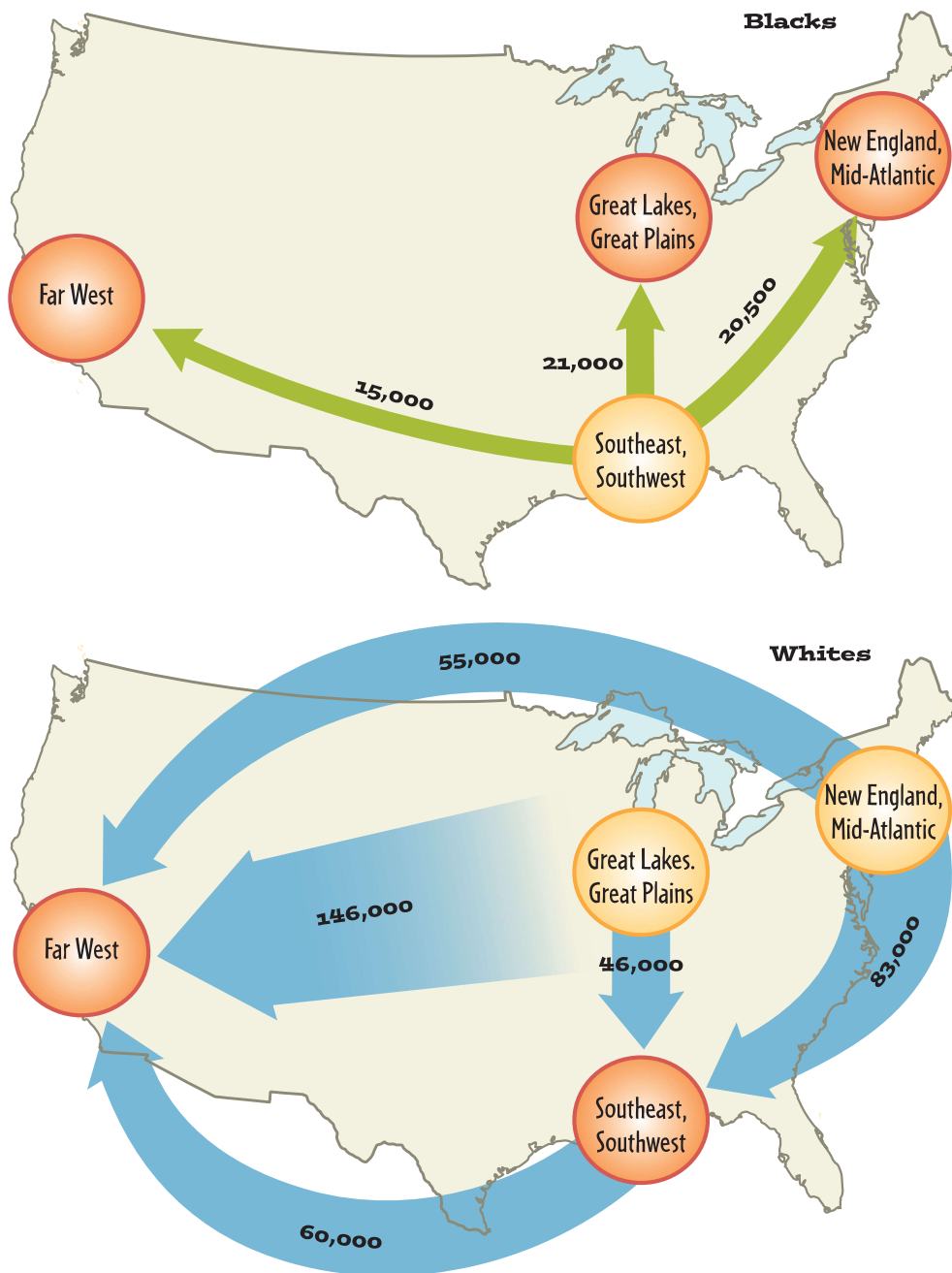
case of nuclear attack. In 1956 Congress passed the Interstate Highway Act, setting in motion the largest public-works project in history. The federal government picked up 90 percent of the cost through a Highway Trust Fund, financed by special taxes on cars, gas, tires, lubricants, and auto parts.

The Interstate Highway Act had an enormous impact on American life. Average annual driving increased by 400 percent. Shopping centers, linked by the new roads, provided suburbanites with an alternative to the longer trip downtown. By 1960 more than 3,840 of them covered as much land as the nation's central business districts. Almost every community had at least one highway strip dotted with stores, bowling alleys, gas stations, and drive-in restaurants.

The interstates affected cities in less fortunate ways. The new highway system featured beltways, ring roads around major urban areas. Instead of leading traffic downtown, the beltways allowed motorists to avoid the center city altogether. As people took to their

cars, intercity rail service and mass transit declined. Seventy-five percent of all government transportation dollars went to subsidize travel by car and truck; only 1 percent was earmarked for urban mass transit. At the same time that middle-class homeowners were moving to the suburbs, many low-paying, unskilled jobs disappeared from the cities. That forced the urban poor into reverse commuting from city to suburb. All these trends made cities less attractive places to live or do business in. With fewer well-to-do taxpayers to draw on, city governments lacked the tax base to finance public services. A vicious cycle ensued that proved most damaging to the urban poor, who had few means of escape.

Much of the white population that moved to the suburbs was replaced by African Americans and Latinos. They were part of larger migrations, especially of millions of black and Latino families leaving rural areas to search for work in urban centers. Most African Americans headed for the Northeast and upper Midwest. While central cities lost 3.6 million white



MAP 28.1: AVERAGE ANNUAL REGIONAL MIGRATION, 1947–1960

In this period African Americans were moving in significant numbers to urban centers in the Northeast, the Midwest, and the Far West. Whites were being drawn to the increasingly diversified economy of the South as well as to the new industries, stimulated by the war, in the Far West. By the 1970s, the trend had become known as the “Sun Belt” phenomenon.

residents, they gained 4.5 million African Americans. Indeed, by 1960 half of all black Americans were living in central cities.

Earlier waves of European immigrants had been absorbed by the expanding urban economy. During the 1950s, however, the flight of jobs and middle-class

their lawns, gardens, and swimming pools had “gen- tly slumped downhill as though they were so much custard pudding.” Over time the effluent from septic systems, assisted by lawn watering, slicked the under- lying layers of shale that tilted toward the nearby Pacific Ocean. With no friction to hold the soil and

taxpayers to the suburbs made it difficult for African Americans and Latinos to follow the same path. In the cities fewer jobs awaited them, while declining school systems made it harder for new- comers to acculturate. In the hardest-hit urban areas, unemployment rose to over 40 percent.

In contrast, the sub- urbs remained beyond the reach of most minorities. Those who could afford the suburbs discovered that most real estate agents refused to show them houses; bankers would not provide mortgages. And many communities adopted either restrictive cove- nants or zoning regulations that kept out “undesir- able” home buyers. One African American, William Myers, finally managed in 1957 to buy a house from a white family in Levittown, Pennsylvania, but the developers did not sell directly to African Americans until 1960.

Environmental Blues >>

With the spread of suburbs came other growing pains. In late summer of 1956 residents of Portuguese Bend, California, learned a painful lesson about septic systems and hill- side development. Houses along Palos Verde Drive South began to move— slowly at first. By Octo- ber, 156 houses along with

shale in place, gravity had done the rest. Suburbs in Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh suffered similar landslide disasters. Other misfortunes occurred where developers built in wetlands and on floodplains.

The disappearance of open space confronted many suburbanites with yet another threat to their dreams. “No more sweep of green,” lamented suburban critic William Whyte, “across the hills are splattered scores of random subdivisions, each laid out with the same dreary curves. Gone are the streams, brooks, woods, and forests that the subdivisions signs talked about.” Gone, too, were habitats for birds, small mammals, fish, and amphibians.

During the suburban boom, homebuilders seldom took the environment into account. Few rural areas had zoning or building codes that restricted where and how much they could build. Less open space meant more houses. To lower land purchase costs, developers leveled hillsides, filled wetlands, and ignored flood dangers. And to lower construction costs they cleared mature trees and vegetation and scrimped on energy-efficient insulation. The cost to homeowners and the environment was not at first apparent. Early suburbanites worried more about finding a home of their own at a price they could afford. Years later their desire to preserve a shred of the suburban dream would contribute to the movement to protect the environment.

✓ REVIEW

What factors pushed the growth of suburbs, and what were the environmental costs of pushing too hard?

THE CULTURE OF SUBURBIA

In suburban tracts across America 1950s, suburbanites discovered the California Dip, the brainchild of the Lipton Company. Homemakers simply mixed Lipton’s soup powder with sour cream and served it up with chips. As one commentator noted:

Using potato chips as little shovels, you gathered up the deliciously salty but drip-prone liquid and popped it, potato chip and all, into your mouth as quickly and gracefully as possible. There was anxiety in all this—particularly the fear that a great glop of the stuff would land on your tie or the rug—but also immense satisfaction.

Lipton had discovered an ingenious way to Americanize an ethnic food. Sour cream had been a mainstay in such dishes as blintzes (thin Jewish pancakes) and borscht (an Eastern European beet soup). With an all-American name like “California Dip,” sour cream’s ethnic associations were left behind. The ingredient went mainstream—into the consensus.

The evolving culture of the suburbs reflected a similar process, a shucking off of ethnic associations. In many city neighborhoods, immigrant parents or grandparents lived on the same block or even in the same apartment with their children. In the suburbs, single-family dwellers often left their relatives and in-laws behind, which meant that ethnic lifestyles were less pronounced. The restrictive immigration policies of the 1920s had also reduced the number of newly arrived foreign-born Americans. Thus suburban culture reflected the tastes of the broad, mostly assimilated middle classes.

Class distinctions were more pronounced between suburban communities than within them. The upper middle class clustered in older developments, which often revolved around country clubs. Working-class suburbs sprouted on the outskirts of large manufacturing centers, where blue-collar families eagerly escaped the city. Within suburbs a homogeneous suburban culture evolved. “We see eye to eye on most things,” commented one Levittown resident, “about raising kids, doing things together with your husband . . . we have practically the same identical background.”

American Civil Religion >> If suburban residents retained less of their ethnic heritages, most held on to their religious beliefs. Religion continued to be a distinctive and segregating factor during the 1950s. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews generally married within their own faiths, and in the suburbs they kept their social distance as well.

Communities that showed no obvious class distinctions were sometimes deeply divided along religious lines. Many Catholics attended parochial rather than public schools, formed their own clubs, and socialized less with their Protestant neighbors. Protestant and Catholic members of the same country club usually did not play golf or tennis in the same foursomes. As for Jews, one historian remarked that whereas a gulf divided many Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Gentiles “seem to have lived on the opposite sides of a religious Grand Canyon.”

Although religious affiliation divided the nation along social and residential lines, most Americans agreed that religious commitment was an essential part of their lives. “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply religious faith,” President Eisenhower declared, “and I don’t care what it is.” In



▲ Backyard barbecuing in Los Angeles, 1950. A more homogeneous culture evolved in suburban communities, where the classic hamburger was always in fashion and Lipton Soup's fancy new chip dip, made from sour cream that had more often been used in ethnic dishes like blintzes and borscht, was now christened as "California Dip."

short, any religion was better than none. Historians have referred to this generalized adherence to faith as American civil religion. Each Friday afternoon the host of TV's *Howdy Doody Show*, Buffalo Bob Smith, urged his young viewers to worship "at the church or synagogue of your choice."

Americans took that advice to heart as church membership rose to over 50 percent for the first time in the twentieth century. As of 1957 the Census Bureau reported that 96 percent of the people asked cited a specific affiliation when asked, "What is your religion?" Many leaders saw religion as a weapon in the cold war. After all, Communists were avowed atheists. Prominent clergy pointed out that the Pledge of Allegiance was so secular that any young Soviet child could recite it. So in 1954 Congress added to the Pledge's "one nation indivisible" the phrase "under God."

Patriotic and anti-Communist themes were strong in the preaching

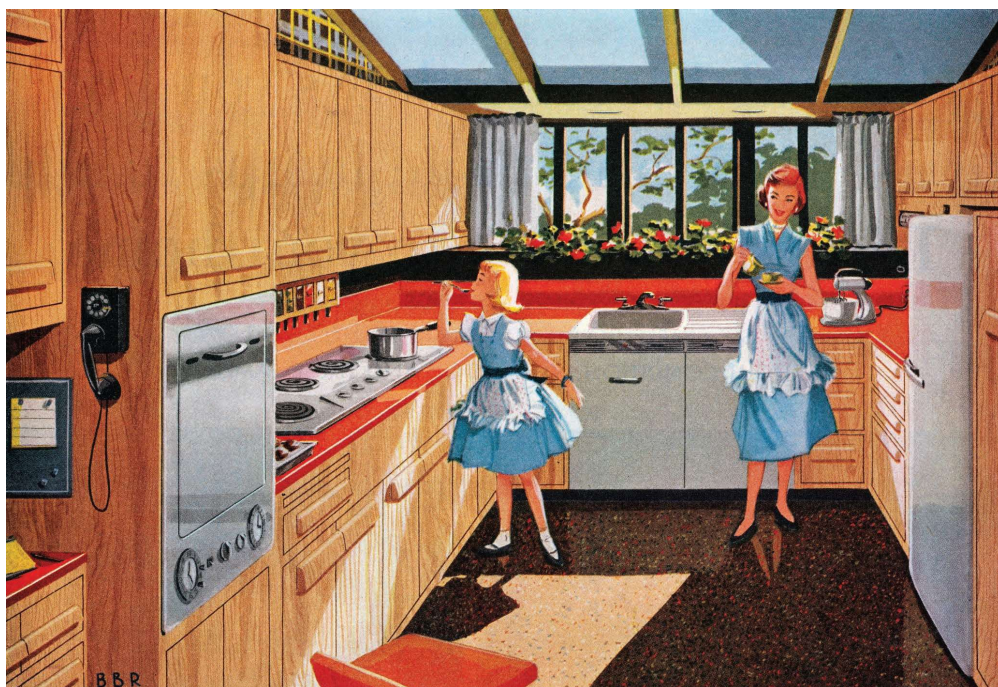
of clergy who pioneered the use of television. Billy Graham, a Baptist revival preacher, first attracted national attention at a tent meeting in Los Angeles in 1949. Following in the tradition of nineteenth-century revivalists like Dwight Moody, Graham soon achieved even wider impact by televising his meetings. Though no revivalist, the Roman Catholic bishop Fulton J. Sheen made the transition from a radio to a television ministry. In his weekly program he extolled traditional values and attacked communism.

"Homemaking" Women in the Workaday World >>

The growth of a suburban culture revealed a contradiction in the lives of middle-class women. Never before were their traditional roles as housewives and mothers so central to American society. Yet never before did more women join the workforce outside the home.

For housewives the single-family suburban home required more labor to keep clean. At the same time, the baby boom left suburban mothers with more children to tend and less help from relatives and grandparents, who less often lived nearby. Increased dependence on automobiles made many a suburban housewife the chauffeur for her family. By the 1950s housewives doing "errands" replaced milkmen and grocers making deliveries.

Yet between 1940 and 1960 the percentage of wives working outside the home doubled, from 15



▲ Once a utilitarian space for food preparation, kitchens became centers of style and even fantasy in the suburban era. They also became larger and brighter. Note that the stainless steel appliances echo the futuristic look of the era's cars.

to 30 percent. While some women took jobs simply to help make ends meet, more than financial necessity was involved. Middle-class married women went to work as often as lower-class wives, and women with college degrees were the most likely to get a job. Two-income families were able to spend far more on extras: gifts, education, recreation, and household appliances. In addition, women found status and self-fulfillment in their jobs, as well as a chance for increased social contacts.

More women were going to college, too, but that increased education did not translate into economic equality. The median wage for women was less than half that for men—a greater gap than in any other industrial nation. The percentage of women holding professional jobs actually dropped between 1950 and 1960.

The Flickering Gray Screen >> The new medium of television fit perfectly into suburban lifestyles. It provided an ideal way to entertain families at home as well as sell them consumer goods.

The entrance of television into the American mainstream came only after World War II. In 1949 Americans owned only a million televisions; by 1960 more Americans, some 46 million, had televisions than had bathrooms. Attendance began dropping at movie theaters and sports arenas. As downtown theaters closed, popular suburban drive-ins allowed whole families to enjoy movies in the comfort of their cars. But even that novelty failed to draw viewers away from their televisions.

In 1948 politics moved into the television age, as the networks covered both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. Two years later, they televised hearings on organized crime chaired by Senator Estes Kefauver. Some 30 million viewers watched senators grill mobster Frank Costello about his criminal organization and its ties to city governments. Millions more watched Senator Joseph McCarthy's ill-fated attack on the army in 1954. With such a large audience, television clearly had the potential to shape the nation's politics. But the networks did not want controversy to drive away advertisers. By the mid-1950s hostile reaction to coverage of McCarthy led them to downgrade public affairs programs. They relied instead on telefilm dramas, quiz shows, sports, and situation comedies.

✓ REVIEW

How did religion, the role of women, and television each help to define suburban culture?

THE POLITICS OF CALM

In presiding over these changes in American society, President Dwight David Eisenhower projected an aura of paternal calm. Pursuing “modern Republicanism,” the new president sought consensus, not confrontation. No longer would conservatives like Robert Taft call for a repeal of the New Deal and a return to laissez-faire capitalism. Eisenhower declared that he was “conservative when it comes to money and liberal when it comes to human beings.”

The Eisenhower Presidency >> Eisenhower had been raised in a large Kansas farm family. His parents, though poor, offered him a warm, caring home steeped in religious faith. In an era of organizational men, Eisenhower succeeded by mastering the military's



^ Eisenhower was a popular president, but his health created widespread public concern. He suffered a mild heart attack in September 1955, and timely surgery on a bowel obstruction the following June saved his life. Despite his age and ill health, the president was easily reelected in 1956. Here he recuperates after the 1955 heart attack, at an army hospital in Denver, Colorado.

bureaucratic politics. In the placid years between the two world wars, the skills “Ike” demonstrated at golf, poker, and bridge often proved as valuable as his military expertise. Yet these genial ways could not hide his ambition or his ability to judge character shrewdly. It took a gifted organizer to coordinate the D-Day invasion and to hold together the egocentric Allied generals who pushed east to Berlin.

As president, Eisenhower supported key New Deal programs. He even agreed to increases in Social Security, unemployment insurance, and the minimum wage. He accepted a small public housing program and a modest federally supported medical insurance plan for the needy. But as a conservative, Eisenhower remained uncomfortable with big government. Thus he rejected more far-reaching liberal proposals on housing and universal health care through the Social Security system.

Eisenhower was more reluctant to imitate New Deal efforts to stimulate the economy. FDR and Truman had established a tradition of activism: when the economy faltered, they used deficit spending and tax cuts to stimulate it. Eisenhower preferred to reduce federal spending and the government’s role in the economy. When a recession struck in 1953–1954, the administration was concerned more with balancing the budget and holding inflation in line than with reducing unemployment through government spending.

Eisenhower was pragmatic in other areas. When major projects called for federal leadership, as with the Highway Act, he supported them. In 1954 he signed the St. Lawrence Seaway Act, which joined the United States and Canada in an ambitious engineering project to open the Great Lakes to ocean shipping. Like the highway program, the seaway was fiscally acceptable because the funding came from user tolls and taxes rather than from general revenues.

A pragmatic approach to farm policy proved more difficult. Farmers made up a major Republican voting bloc. The popularity of crop subsidies and modern technology among farmers made it difficult to regulate agricultural production. Even when farmers cut back acreage, they discovered that automated harvesters, fertilizers, and new varieties of plants actually increased farm output. In an age of continuing centralization, more and more small farms were being replaced by agribusinesses. As economic power concentrated in these large commercial farming operations, so did their political muscle to protect farm subsidies.

Despite occasional setbacks Eisenhower remained popular. Although he suffered a major heart attack in 1955, voters gladly reelected him in 1956. But poor economic performance took its toll. In the wake of the 1954 recession, congressional Democrats gained a 29-member majority in the House and a 1-vote edge in the Senate. Never again would Eisenhower work

with a Republican majority. In 1958, when recession again dragged down the economy, the midterm elections gave Democrats an even more commanding advantage. Modern Republicanism did not put down deep roots beyond Eisenhower’s White House.

The Conglomerate World >> Corporate America welcomed the administration’s pro-business attitudes as well as the era’s general prosperity. Wages for the average worker rose over 35 percent between 1950 and 1960. Business and labor leaders negotiated generous wage and benefits packages that minimized the strikes of earlier eras. At the same time, the economic distress of the 1930s had led corporate executives to devise new ways to minimize the danger of economic downturns. In various ways, each of the approaches sought to minimize shocks in specific markets by expanding the size of corporations.

One expansion strategy took the form of diversification. In the 1930s industrial giant General Electric had concentrated largely in one area: equipment for generating electric power and light. When the Depression struck, GE found its markets evaporating. The company responded by entering markets for appliances, X-ray machines, and elevators—all products developed or enhanced by the company’s research labs. In the postwar era General Electric diversified even further, into nuclear power, jet engines, financial services, and television. Diversification was most practical for large industrial firms, whose size allowed them to support extensive research and development.

Conglomeration often turned small companies into giants. Unlike earlier horizontal and vertical combinations, **conglomerate** mergers could join companies with

conglomerate corporation whose various branches or subsidiaries are either directly or indirectly spread among a variety of industries, usually unrelated to one another.

seemingly unrelated products. Over a 20-year period International Telephone and Telegraph branched out from its basic communications business into banking, hotels and motels, car

rental, home building, and insurance. Corporations also became multinational by expanding their overseas operations or buying out potential foreign competitors. Large integrated oil companies such as Mobil and Standard Oil of New Jersey developed huge oil fields in the Middle East and markets around the free world.

Corporations that manufactured consumer goods depended on advertising to reach potential customers. “The only institution which we have for instilling new needs, for training people to act as consumers, for altering men’s values, and thus for hastening their adjustment to potential abundance is advertising,” historian David Potter concluded. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith agreed that advertising “create[d]

desires—to bring into being wants that previously did not exist.”

The great “cola war” dramatized Potter’s point. Pepsi touted itself as a David battling the Goliath of soda pop, Coca-Cola, cultivating a contrasting image in order to gain market share. While Coke appealed to tradition, Pepsi suggested that its customers were young, fashionable, and popular:

Be sociable, look smart
Keep up—to—date with Pepsi
Drink light refreshing Pepsi
Stay young and fair and debonair
Be sociable, have a Pepsi!

Pepsi’s decision to target the young and women transformed its corporate fortunes. Coke still positioned itself as the cola leader, with universal appeal that stood the test of time. But Pepsi became a formidable rival, with its drink for young, upwardly mobile, suburban families.

One aid to managing these modern corporate giants was the advent of electronic data processing. In the early 1950s computers were virtually unknown in private industry. But banks and insurance companies saw the new mainframe computers of International Business Machines (IBM) as an answer to their need to manipulate huge quantities of records and statistical data. Manufacturers, especially in the petroleum, chemical, automotive, and electronics industries, began to use computers to monitor their production lines, quality control, and inventory.

✓ REVIEW

In what ways did President Eisenhower show his pragmatic approach to governing?

CRACKS IN THE CONSENSUS

In the 1950s many corporations advertised a cultural consensus just as much as the products they sold. They praised prosperity as a reflection of an American way of life. “What was good for the country, was good for General Motors,” GM’s president assured the nation. Not all Americans were persuaded of the virtues of consensus and business leadership. Intellectuals and artists found in corporate culture a stifling conformity that crushed individual creativity. On the fringes of society, the Beats scorned traditional behavior and values. Closer to the mainstream, a new generation of musicians created rock and roll, which became the sound of youthful rebellion.

Critics of Mass Culture >> In Levittown, New Jersey, a woman who had invited her neighbors to a cocktail party eagerly awaited them dressed in newly fashionable Capri pants—a tight-fitting calf-length style. Alas, one early-arriving couple glimpsed the woman through a window. What on earth was the hostess wearing? Pajamas? Who in their right mind would entertain in pajamas? The couple sneaked home, afraid they had made a mistake about the day of the party. They telephoned another neighbor, who anxiously called yet others on the guest list. The neighbors finally mustered enough courage to attend the party. But when the hostess later learned of their misunderstanding, she put her Capri pants in the closet for good. Levittown was not ready for such a change in fashion.

Was America turning into a vast suburban wasteland, where the neighbors’ worries over Capri pants would stifle all individuality? Many highbrow intellectuals derided the homogenized lifestyle created by mass consumption, conformity, and **mass media**. Critics such as Dwight Macdonald sarcastically attacked the culture of the suburban middle classes: Reader’s Digest Condensed Books and uplifting film spectacles such as *The Ten Commandments*. “Mid-cult,” Macdonald called it, which was his shorthand for uninspired middlebrow culture.

mass media forms of communication designed to reach a vast audience, generally a nation-state or larger, without personal contact between the senders and receivers.

Other critics charged that the skyscrapers and factories of giant conglomerates housed an impersonal world. In large, increasingly automated workplaces, skilled laborers seemed little more than caretakers of machines. Large corporations required middle-level executives to submerge their personal goals in the processes and work routines of a large bureaucracy. David Riesman, a sociologist, condemned stifling conformity in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). In nineteenth-century America, Riesman argued, Americans had been “inner directed.” It was their own consciences that formed their values and drove them to seek success. In contrast, modern workers had developed a personality shaped not so much by inner convictions as by the opinions of their peers. The new “other-directed” society of suburbia preferred security to success. “Go along to get along” was its motto.

William Whyte carried Riesman’s critique from the workplace to the suburb in *The Organization Man* (1956). Here he found rootless families, shifted from town to town by the demands of corporations. (IBM, went one standard joke, stood for “I’ve Been Moved.”) The typical “organization man” was sociable but not terribly ambitious. He sought primarily to “keep up with

the Joneses” and the number of consumer goods they owned. He lived in a suburban “split-level trap,” as one critic put it, one among millions of “haggard” men, “tense and anxious” women, and “the gimme kids.”

No doubt such portraits were overdrawn and overly alarmist. Many suburbanites put up with the constraints of conformity because they preferred the convenience of mass-produced goods. But the critics were on to something. Behind the impersonal facade of bureaucratic organizations and suburban tract houses, millions of Americans experienced a growing sense of discontent.

Juvenile Delinquency, Rock and Roll, and Rebellion >>

Young Americans were among suburbia’s sharpest critics. Dance crazes, outlandish clothing, slang, rebelliousness, and sexual precociousness—all these behaviors challenged middle-class respectability. More than a few educators warned that America had spawned a generation of rebellious “juvenile delinquents.” Psychologist Fredric Wertham told a group of doctors, “You cannot understand present-day juvenile delinquency if you do not take into account the pathogenic and pathoplastic [infectious] influence of comic books.” Others laid the blame on films and the lyrics of popular music.

The center of the new teen culture was the high school. Whether in consolidated rural school districts, new suburban schools, or city systems, the large, comprehensive high schools of the 1950s were often miniature melting pots where middle-class students were exposed to, and often adopted, the style of the lower

classes. They wore jeans and T-shirts, challenged authority, and defiantly smoked cigarettes, much like the motorcycle gang leader portrayed by Marlon Brando in the film *The Wild One* (1954).

In many ways the debate over juvenile delinquency was an argument about social class and, to a lesser degree, race. When adults complained that “delinquent” teenagers dressed poorly, lacked ambition, were irresponsible and sexually promiscuous, these were the same arguments traditionally used to denigrate other outsiders—immigrants, the poor, and African Americans. Nowhere were these racial and class undertones more evident than in the hue and cry that greeted the arrival of rock and roll.

Before 1954 popular music had been divided into three major categories: pop, country and western, and rhythm and blues. A handful of major record companies with almost exclusively white singers dominated the pop charts. On one fringe of the popular field was country and western, often split into cowboy musicians such as Roy Rogers and Gene Autry and the hillbilly style associated with Nashville. The music industry generally treated rhythm and blues as “race music,” whose performers and audience were largely black. Each of these musical traditions, it is worth noting, grew out of regional cultures. As the West and the South merged into the national culture, so these musical subcultures were gradually integrated into the national mainstream.

By the mid-1950s the distinctiveness of the three styles began to blur. Singers on the white pop charts recorded a few songs from country and from



^ James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause*. Dean was just 24 when he died in a car crash in 1955, but he remained a symbol of youthful discontent.

rhythm and blues. The popularity of crossovers such as “Sh-boom,” “Tutti-Frutti,” and “Earth Angel” indicated that a major shift in taste and market was under way. Lyrics still reflected the pop field’s pre-occupation with young love, marriage, and happiness, but the music now vibrated with the rawer, earthier style of rhythm and blues. Country and western singer Bill Haley brought the new blend to the fore in 1954 with “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” the first rock song to reach the top ten on the pop charts.

And then—calamity! Millions of middle-class roofs nearly blew off with the appearance in 1955 of the rhythmic and raucous Elvis Presley. By background Elvis was a country boy whose musical style combined elements of gospel, country, and blues. But it was his hip-swinging, pelvis-plunging performances that electrified teenage audiences. To conservative adults, Presley’s long hair, sideburns, and tight jeans seemed menacingly delinquent, an expression of hostile rebellion. What they often resented but rarely admitted was that Elvis looked lower class, sounded black, and really could sing.

Beyond the frenetic rhythms of rock and roll, and even further beyond the pale of suburban culture, a subculture flourished known as the beat generation. In run-down urban neighborhoods and college towns this motley collection of artists, intellectuals, musicians, and middle-class students dropped out of mainstream society. In dress and behavior the Beats self-consciously rejected what they viewed as the excessive spiritual bankruptcy of America’s middle-class culture. They were nonconformists in a conformist world. Cool urban “hipsters”—especially black jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins—were their models. They read poetry, listened to jazz, explored Oriental philosophy, and experimented openly with drugs, mystical religions, and sex.

✓ REVIEW

Why did social critics worry about conformity in the 1950s?

NATIONALISM IN AN AGE OF SUPERPOWERS

One source of the Beats’ dismay with modern society was the dark shadow of the atomic bomb. Along the Iron Curtain

of Eastern Europe and across the battle lines of northern Asia, the Soviet–American cold war settled into an uneasy stalemate. But World War II had also disrupted Europe’s colonial relationships. As nationalists in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia fought to gain independence, the two superpowers competed for their allegiance. Across the globe the Eisenhower administration sought ways to prevent the Soviet Union from capturing national independence movements. To do so, it sometimes used the threat of nuclear war to block Communist expansion in Europe or Asia.

To the Brink? >> Eisenhower, no stranger to world politics, shared the conduct of foreign policy with his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles. Coming from a family of missionaries and diplomats, Dulles had within him a touch of both. He viewed the Soviet–American struggle in almost religious terms, as a fight between good and evil. Eisenhower was less hostile toward the Soviets. In the end, the two men’s differing temperaments led to a policy that seesawed from confrontation to conciliation.

The Republican Party was divided over issues of national security. As a centrist Eisenhower sought to compromise between those who favored an aggressive policy to defeat communism and those who worried that big defense meant big government. Dulles wanted the United States to aid in liberating the “captive peoples” of Eastern Europe and other Communist nations. However, Eisenhower was equally determined to cut back military spending and troop levels in order to keep the budget balanced. The president was sometimes irked at the “fantastic programs” the Pentagon kept proposing. “If we demand too much in taxes in order to build planes and ships,” he argued, “we will tend to dry up the accumulations of capital that are necessary to provide jobs for the million or more new workers that we must absorb each year.”

Rather than rely on costly conventional forces, Eisenhower and Dulles used the threat of massive nuclear retaliation to intimidate the Soviets into behaving less aggressively. Dulles insisted that Americans not shrink from the threat of nuclear war: “If you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost.” And as Secretary of Treasury George Humphrey put it, a nuclear strategy was much cheaper—“a bigger bang for

Opinion



Why did rock and roll arouse so much controversy?

the buck.” Henceforth American foreign policy would have a “new look,” though behind the more militant rhetoric lay an ongoing commitment to containment.

Brinkmanship in Asia >> Moving beyond talk of **brinkmanship** to concrete action did not prove easy. When Dulles announced American intentions to “unleash” Chiang Kai-shek to attack mainland

brinkmanship policy of using the threat of nuclear war in order to persuade an opponent to back down.

China from his outpost on Taiwan (formerly Formosa), China threatened to invade Taiwan. At that, Eisenhower

ordered the Seventh Fleet into the area to protect rather than unleash Chiang. If the Communists attacked, Dulles warned bluntly, “we’ll have to use atomic weapons.”

Nuclear weapons also figured in the American response to a crisis in Indochina. There, Vietnamese forces led by Ho Chi Minh were fighting the French, who had reestablished their colonial rule at the end of World War II. Between 1950 and 1954, the United States provided France with more than \$1 billion in military aid in Vietnam. Eisenhower worried that if

Vietnam fell to a Communist revolutionary such as Ho, other nations of Southeast Asia would follow. “You have a row of dominoes set up,” the president warned; “you knock over the first one [y]ou could have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”

Worn down by a war they seemed unable to win, the French in 1954 tried to force a final showdown with Ho Chi Minh’s army at Dien Bien Phu. (For a map of Vietnam, see page 634.) Finding themselves besieged and near defeat, the French pleaded for more American aid. Admiral Arthur Radford, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed a massive American air raid, perhaps even using tactical nuclear weapons. But again Eisenhower pulled back. The idea of American involvement in another Asian war aroused opposition from both allies and domestic political leaders.

In May 1954 the garrison at Dien Bien Phu collapsed under the siege. At an international peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland, the French negotiated the terms of their withdrawal. Ho Chi Minh agreed to pull his forces north of the 17th parallel, temporarily dividing the nation into North and South Vietnam.



MAP 28.2: ASIAN TROUBLE SPOTS

After the Geneva Accords divided Indochina into North and South Vietnam, Secretary of State Dulles organized the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) to resist Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. In addition to the conflict in Vietnam, tensions were fueled by the mutual hostility between mainland Communist China and Chiang Kai-shek’s Taiwan, as well as the offshore islands Quemoy and Matsu. *What geographic factors caused the United States to make Thailand a key ally?*

>> Nikita Khrushchev was by turns boisterous and somber, threatening and conciliatory—a style that both captivated and alarmed Americans.

Because of Ho's broad popularity, he seemed assured an easy victory in elections scheduled for within the next two years. Dulles, however, viewed any Communist victory as unacceptable, even if the election was democratic. He convinced Eisenhower to support a South Vietnamese government under Ngo Dinh Diem.

Dulles insisted that Diem was not bound by the Geneva Accords to hold any election—a position the autocratic Diem eagerly supported. To help keep him in power, the United States sent a military mission to train South Vietnam's army. The commitment was small, but a decade later it would return to haunt Americans.

The Superpowers >> Korea, Taiwan, Indochina—to Dulles and Eisenhower, the crises in Asia and elsewhere could all be traced back to the Soviet dictatorship. But in March 1953 Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin died. Power soon fell to Nikita Khrushchev, a party stalwart with a formidable intellect and peasant origins in the farm country of Ukraine. In some ways Khrushchev resembled another farm-belt politician, Harry Truman. Both were unsophisticated yet shrewd, earthy in their sense of humor, energetic, short-tempered, and largely inexperienced in international affairs. Khrushchev kept American diplomats off balance. At times genial and conciliatory, he would suddenly become demanding and boastful.

Khrushchev moderated some of the excesses of the Stalin years. At home, he gradually shifted the Soviet economy toward production of consumer goods. Internationally, he called for an easing of tensions and reduced forces in Europe, hoping to make Western Europeans less dependent on the United States. In Washington the administration was unsure of how to receive the new overtures. Conservatives kept the spirit of McCarthyism alive, so that compromise with the Soviets risked provoking their wrath. It was actually Winston Churchill who suggested that the Russians might be serious about negotiating. In 1955 the Americans, British, French, and Soviets met in a

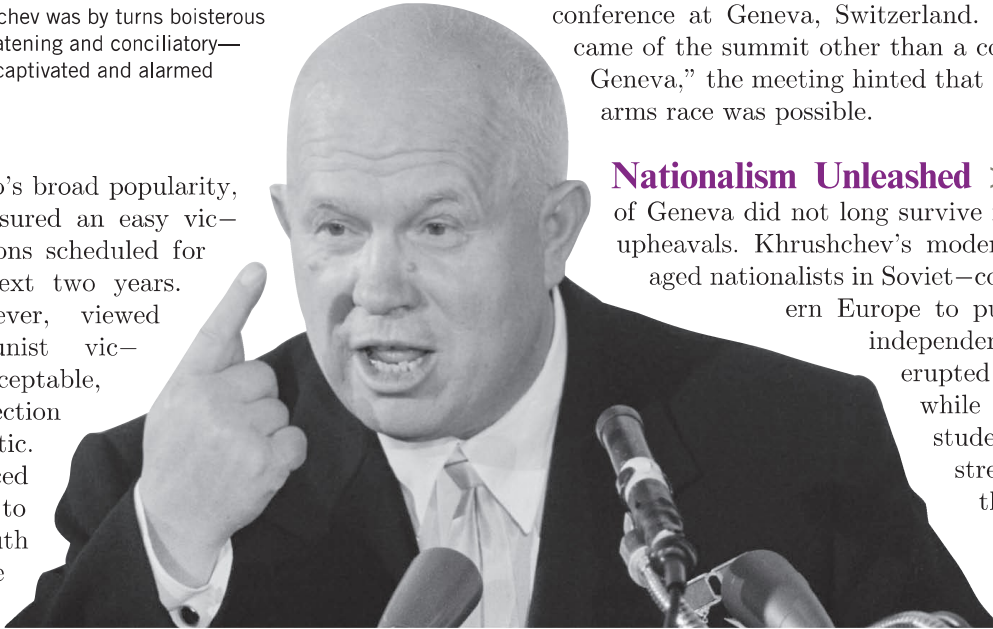
conference at Geneva, Switzerland. Although little came of the summit other than a cordial “spirit of Geneva,” the meeting hinted that a cooling in the arms race was possible.

Nationalism Unleashed >> The spirit of Geneva did not long survive new nationalist upheavals. Khrushchev's moderation encouraged nationalists in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe to push for greater independence. Riots erupted in Poland, while in Hungary students took to the streets demanding that a coalition government replace the puppet regime established

by Stalin. At first Moscow accepted the new Hungarian government and began to remove Soviet tanks. But when Hungary announced it was withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact, the tanks rolled back into Budapest to crush the uprising in October 1956. The United States protested but did nothing to help liberate the “captive nations.” For all its tough talk, the “new look” foreign policy recognized that the Soviets possessed a sphere of influence where the United States would not intervene.

Nationalist movements also flourished in the Middle East. When a nationalist government in Iran seemed to lean toward the Soviets, Eisenhower approved a covert CIA operation in 1953 to oust the government and restore a firm ally, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Eisenhower and Dulles also worried about the actions of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. Dulles had promised American aid to help Nasser build the Aswan Dam, a massive power project on the Nile River. But when Nasser formed an Arab alliance against the young state of Israel and pursued economic ties with the Warsaw bloc, Dulles withdrew the American offer of aid. In 1956 Nasser angrily countered by seizing the British-owned Universal Suez Canal Company. The company ran the waterway through which tankers carried most of Europe's oil.

Events then moved quickly. Israel, alarmed at Nasser's Arab alliance, invaded the Sinai peninsula of Egypt on October 29—the same day Hungary announced it was leaving the Warsaw Pact. Three days later French and British forces seized the canal in an attempt to restore their own interests and prestige. Angered that his allies had not consulted him, Eisenhower joined the Soviet Union in supporting a United Nations resolution condemning Britain, France, and Israel and demanding an immediate cease-fire.





^ Fidel Castro was initially welcomed when he arrived in Washington, D.C., shortly after taking power in Cuba in 1959.

By December American pressures forced Britain and France to remove their forces. Few events placed as much strain on the Western alliance as the Suez crisis. At the same time, Nasser had demonstrated the potential force of Third World nationalism.

Given the unstable situation in the Middle East, Eisenhower convinced Congress to give him the authority to use force against any Communist attack in that region. What became known as the Eisenhower Doctrine allowed the president in times of crisis to preempt Congress's power to declare war. Anticommunism had led many conservatives to overcome their fear of a powerful presidency. In 1958 Eisenhower used his authority to send U.S. marines into Lebanon, a small nation that claimed to have been infiltrated by Nasser's supporters. Since no fighting had yet occurred, sunbathers on the beaches of Beirut, Lebanon's capital, were startled as 5,000 combat-clad marines stormed ashore. In the end, the crisis blew over, and the American forces withdrew. Dulles claimed that the United States had once again turned back the Communist drive into the emerging nations. In reality, nationalism more than communism had been at the root of Middle Eastern turmoil.

Nationalist forces were also in ferment in Latin America, where only 2 percent of the people controlled 75 percent of the land. Repressive dictatorships exercised power, and foreign interests—especially American ones—dominated Latin American economies. In

1954 Eisenhower authorized the CIA to send a band of Latin American mercenaries into Guatemala to overthrow a nationalist government there. Similar economic tensions beset Cuba, where the United States owned 80 percent of the country's utilities and operated a major naval base at Guantánamo Bay. A disgruntled middle-class lawyer, Fidel Castro, gained the support of impoverished peasants in Cuba's mountains and, in January 1959, drove the deeply corrupt and pro-American dictator from power.

At first many Americans applauded the revolution, welcoming Castro when he visited the United States. But Eisenhower was distinctly cool to the cigar-smoking Cuban, who had filled key government positions with Communists, launched a sweeping agricultural reform, and confiscated American properties. Retaliating, Eisenhower embargoed Cuban sugar and mobilized opposition to Castro in other Latin American countries. Cut off from American markets and aid, Castro turned to the Soviet Union.

The Response to *Sputnik* >> Castro's turn to the Soviets seemed all the more dangerous because of Soviet achievements in their missile program. In 1957 they stunned America by orbiting the first space satellite, dubbed *Sputnik*. By 1959 the Soviets had crash-landed a much larger payload on the moon. If the Russians could target the moon, surely they could launch nuclear missiles against America. In contrast,



^ Even before the launch of *Sputnik* in 1957, Americans had begun devising fallout shelters for protection from the effects of a nuclear attack. *What messages about nuclear war does this photo send?*



Dueling DOCUMENTS

THE KITCHEN DEBATE

On July 24, 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev met at an exhibition in Moscow, showcasing American technology and culture. For Nixon the consumer goods on display offered proof of the superiority of the American free-enterprise system. Khrushchev argued forcefully, though defensively, that the Soviet Union could provide equally well for its housewives. While the event appeared to be spontaneous, Nixon had been looking for an opportunity to stand up to the pugnacious Russian leader. In this primary newspaper account, the dueling is within a single document.

DOCUMENT 1 Khrushchev-Nixon Debate

Nixon: "There are some instances where you may be ahead of us, for example in the development of the thrust of your rockets for the investigation of outer space, there may be some instances in which we are ahead of you—in color television, for instance."

Khrushchev: "No, we are up with you on this, too. We have bested you in one technique and also in the other."

Nixon: "You see, you never concede anything."

Khrushchev: "I do not give up."

Nixon: "Wait till you see the picture. Let's have for more communication and exchange in this very area that we speak of. We should hear you more on our televisions. You should hear us more on yours."

Khrushchev: "That's a good idea. Let's do it like this. You appear before our people. We will appear before your people. People will see and appreciate this."

Nixon: "There is not a day in the United States when we cannot read what you say. When Kozlov was speaking in California about peace, you were talking here in somewhat different terms. This was reported extensively in the American press. Never make a statement here if you don't want it to be read in the United States. I can promise you every word you say will be translated into English."

Khrushchev: "I doubt it. I want you to give your word that this speech of mine will be heard by the American people."

Nixon: [shaking hands on it] "By the same token, everything I say will be translated and heard all over the Soviet Union?"

Khrushchev: "That's agreed."

Nixon: "You must not be afraid of ideas."

Khrushchev: "We are telling you not to be afraid of ideas. We have no reason to be afraid. We have already broken free from such a situation."

Nixon: "Well, then, let's have more exchange of them. We are all agreed on that. All right? All right?" . . .

Khrushchev: [after Nixon called attention to a built-in panel-controlled washing machine.] "We have such things."

Nixon: "This is the newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installation in the houses." He added that Americans were interested in making life easier for their women.

Mr. Khrushchev remarked that in the Soviet Union, they did not have "the capitalist attitude toward women."

Nixon: "I think that this attitude toward women is universal. What we want to do is make easier the life of our housewives." He explained that the house could be built for \$14,000 and that most veterans had bought houses for between \$10,000 and \$15,000. . . .

"Let me give you an example you can appreciate. Our steelworkers, as you know, are on strike. But any steelworker could buy this house. They earn \$3 an hour. This house costs about \$100 a month to buy on a contract running 25 to 30 years."

Khrushchev: "We have steel workers and we have peasants who also can afford to spend \$14,000 for a house." He said American houses were built to last only 20 years, so builders could sell new houses at the end of that period. "We build firmly. We build for our children and grandchildren."

Mr. Nixon said he thought American houses would last more than 20 years, but even so, after 20 years many Americans went a new home or a new kitchen, which would be obsolete then. The American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques, he said.

Khrushchev: "This theory does not hold water." He said some things never got out of date—furniture and furnishings, perhaps, but not houses. He said he did not think houses. He said he did not think that what Americans had written about their houses was all strictly accurate.

Nixon: [pointing to television screen.] "We can see here what is happening in other parts of the home."

Khrushchev: "This is probably always out of order."

Nixon: "Da [yes.]"

Khrushchev: "Don't you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down? Many things you've shown us are interesting but they are not needed in life. They have no useful purpose. They are merely gadgets. We have a saying, if you have bedbugs you have to catch one and pour boiling water into the ear."

Nixon: "We have another saying. This is that the way to kill a fly is to make it drink whisky. But we have a better use for whisky. [Aside] I like to have this battle of wits with the Chairman. He knows his business."

Source: "The Kitchen Debate," Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, July 24, 1959, Moscow, U.S.S.R.

THINKING CRITICALLY

How does Khrushchev counter Nixon's explanation of "planned obsolescence"? What is Khrushchev's attitude about high-tech American consumer goods? Why was Nixon so insistent that his ideas be broadcast in the Soviet Union? In what way could women be offended by the two leaders' comments?

the American space program suffered so many delays and mishaps that rockets exploding on launch were nicknamed “flopniks” and “kaputniks.”

How had the Soviets managed to catch up with American technology so quickly? Some Americans blamed the schools, especially weak programs in science and math. In 1958 Eisenhower joined with Congress to enact a National Defense Education Act, designed to strengthen graduate education and the teaching of science, math, and foreign languages. At the same time, crash programs to build basement fallout shelters sought to protect Americans in case of a nuclear attack. Democrats charged that the administration had allowed the United States to face an unacceptable “missile gap.”

Thaws and Freezes >> Throughout this series of crises, each superpower found it difficult to interpret the other’s motives. The Russians exploited nationalist revolutions where they could—less successfully in Egypt, more so in Cuba. “We will bury you,” Khrushchev admonished Americans, though it was unclear whether he meant through peaceful competition or military confrontation. More menacingly, in November 1958 he demanded that the Western powers withdraw all troops from West Berlin within six months. Berlin would then become a “free city,” and the Western powers could negotiate further access to it only with East Germany, a government the West had refused to recognize. When Eisenhower flatly rejected the ultimatum, Khrushchev backed away from his hard-line stance.

Rather than adopt a more belligerent course, Eisenhower determined to use the last 18 months of his presidency to improve Soviet–American relations. The shift in policy was made easier because Eisenhower knew from American intelligence (but could not admit publicly) that the “missile gap” was not real. While willing to spend more on missile development, he refused to heed the calls for a crash defense program at any cost. Instead, he took a conciliatory approach by inviting Khrushchev to visit the United States in September 1959. Though the meetings produced no significant results, they eased tensions.

In May Eisenhower’s plans for a return visit to the Soviet Union were abruptly canceled. Only weeks earlier the Russians had shot down a high-altitude U–2 American spy plane over Soviet territory. At first Eisenhower claimed the plane had strayed off course during weather research, but Khrushchev sprang his trap: the CIA pilot, Gary Powers, had been captured alive. The president then admitted that he had personally authorized the U–2 over-flights for reasons of national security.

That episode ended Eisenhower’s hopes that his personal diplomacy might create a true thaw in the cold war. Yet a less mature president might have led

the United States into more severe conflict or even war. Eisenhower was not readily impressed by the promises of new weapons systems. He left office with a warning that too much military spending would lead to “an unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought” by the **military–industrial complex** at the expense of democratic institutions.

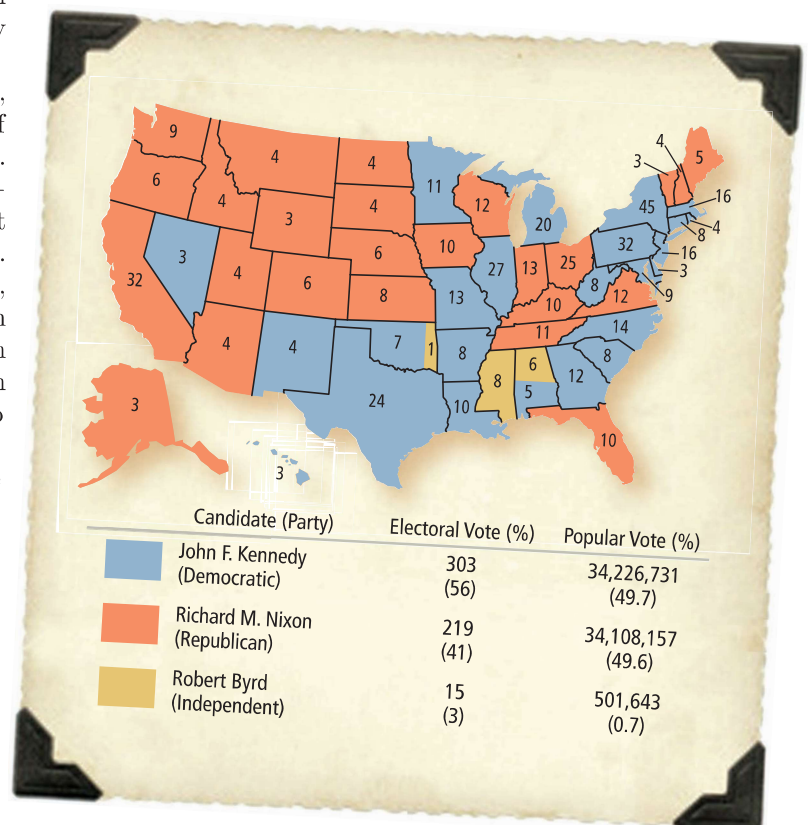
military-industrial complex combination of the U.S. armed forces, arms manufacturers, and associated political and commercial interests, which grew rapidly during the cold war era.

✓ REVIEW

How did President Eisenhower’s “New Look” foreign policy affect American actions in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America?

THE COLD WAR ON A NEW FRONTIER

The 1960 election promised to bring the winds of change to Washington. The opponents—Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts—were the first major presidential candidates born in the



MAP 28.3: ELECTION OF 1960

twentieth century. At age 43 John Fitzgerald Kennedy would be the youngest person ever elected to the office. Nixon was just four years older. The nation needed to find “new frontiers,” Kennedy proclaimed. His rhetoric was noble, but the direction in which he would take the nation was far from clear.

The Election of 1960 >> The biggest issue of the campaign was social as much as political. Jack Kennedy was a Roman Catholic out of Irish Boston, and no Catholic had ever been elected president. Conservative Protestants, many concentrated in the heavily Democratic South, were convinced that a Catholic president would never be “free to exercise his own judgment” if the pope ordered otherwise. Kennedy confronted the issue head-on, addressing an association of hostile ministers in Houston. “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute,” he said, “—where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners how to vote.” House Speaker Sam Rayburn, an old Texas pol, was astonished by Kennedy’s bravura performance. “My God!... He’s eating them blood raw.”

Vice President Nixon ran on his political experience and reputation as a staunch anti-Communist. His campaign faltered in October as unemployment rose. Nixon was also hurt by a series of televised debates with Kennedy—the first broadcast nationally. Despite his debating skill, Nixon was overtired, and his Lazy Shave makeup failed to hide his five-o’clock shadow. Election Day saw the largest turnout in 50 years: 64 percent of all voters. Out of 68.3 million ballots cast, Kennedy won by a margin of just 118,000. The whisker-thin victory was made possible by strong Catholic support in key states. “Hyphenated” Americans—Hispanic, Jewish, Irish, Italian, Polish,

and German—voted Democratic in record numbers, while much of the black vote that had gone to Eisenhower in 1956 returned to the Democratic fold.

The Hard-Nosed Idealists of Camelot >>

Many observers compared the Kennedy White House to Camelot, King Arthur’s magical court. A popular musical of 1960 pictured Camelot as a land where skies were fair, men brave, women pretty, and the days full of challenge. With similar vigor, Kennedy surrounded himself with bright, energetic advisers. Touch football games on the White House lawn displayed a rough-and-tumble playfulness, akin to Arthur’s jousting tournaments of old.

In truth, Kennedy was not a liberal by temperament. Handsome and intelligent, he possessed an ironic, self-deprecating humor. Yet in Congress, he had led an undistinguished career, supported Senator Joe McCarthy, and earned a reputation as a playboy. He joined a faction of Democrats who wanted to overcome the Republican advantage on national security issues. To woo the liberals, Kennedy surrounded himself with a distinguished group of intellectuals and academics.

Robert Strange McNamara typified the pragmatic, liberal, but anti-Communist bent of the new Kennedy team. Steely and brilliant, McNamara was one of the postwar breed of young executives known as the “whiz kids.” As a Harvard Business School professor and later as president of Ford Motors, he specialized in using new quantitative tools to streamline business. As the new secretary of defense, McNamara intended to find more flexible and efficient ways of conducting the cold war.

Kennedy liked men like this—witty, bright, intellectual—because they seemed comfortable with power and were not afraid to use it. If Khrushchev spoke of waging guerrilla “wars of liberation,” Americans could play that game, too. The president’s leisure reading reflected a similar adventurous taste:



^ The urbane John F. Kennedy was associated with both King Arthur (*left*, played by Richard Burton in the 1960 musical) and the spy James Bond (played by Sean Connery, *right*). Kennedy and his advisers prided themselves on their pragmatic, hard-nosed idealism. But while Bond used advanced technology and covert operations to save the world, in real life such approaches had their downside, as the growing civil war in Vietnam would demonstrate.

the popular James Bond spy novels. Agent 007, with his license to kill, was sophisticated, a cool womanizer (as even Kennedy continued to be), and ready to use the latest technology to deal with Communist villains. Ironically, Bond demonstrated that there could be plenty of glamour in being “hard-nosed” and pragmatic. That illicit pleasure was the underside, perhaps, of Camelot’s high ideals.

The (Somewhat) New Frontier at Home >>

It proved more difficult to take bold initiatives at home than abroad. Kennedy and his advisers had no broad vision for reform. They preferred to tackle problems one by one. In making domestic policy Kennedy found himself hemmed in by a Democratic Congress dominated by conservatives. As a result the president’s legislative achievements were modest. He passed a bill providing some financial aid to depressed industrial and rural areas. But on key issues, including civil rights, aid to education, and national health insurance, Kennedy made no headway.

He wavered, too, on how to manage the economy. The president’s liberal advisers favored increased government spending to reduce unemployment, even if that meant a budget deficit. Even so, Kennedy believed that prosperity for big business spelled growth for the whole nation. Thus the president asked Congress to ease antitrust restrictions and grant investment credits and tax breaks—actions that pleased corporate interests. But he was convinced that the government needed to limit the power of both large corporations and unions to set prices and wages. The alternative was an inflationary spiral in which wage increases would spark price increases followed by even higher wage demands.

To prevent such a spiral, the Council of Economic Advisers proposed that steel manufacturers agree to hold down prices if labor unions agreed to limit an increase in their wages. When the large steel corporations broke their part of the informal bargain by sharply raising steel prices, Kennedy angrily called for investigations into price fixing and shifted Pentagon purchases to smaller steel companies that had not raised prices. The intense pressure caused the big companies to drop the price increases but soured relations between the president and the business community.

Kennedy’s Cold War >> During the 1952 election Republicans exploited the stalemate in Korea, the fall of China, and the fear of domestic communism to suggest that the Democrats could not protect the nation’s security. Once elected Kennedy was determined not to be seen as soft on communism. The cold war contest, he argued, had shifted from the traditional struggle over Europe to the developing nations

in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The United States should be armed with a more flexible range of military and economic options.

The Alliance for Progress, announced in the spring of 1961, reflected the Kennedy approach. Kennedy promised to provide \$20 billion in foreign aid to Latin America over 10 years—about four times the aid given under Eisenhower. In return Latin American nations would agree to reform unfair tax policies and begin agricultural land reforms. If successful the alliance would discourage future Castro-style revolutions. With similar fanfare the administration set up the Peace Corps. This program sent idealistic young men and women to Third World nations to provide technical, educational, and public health services. Under the alliance, most Peace Corps volunteers were assigned to Latin America.

To back the new economic policies with military muscle, the Pentagon directed jungle warfare schools, both in North Carolina and in the Canal Zone. The programs were designed to train Latin American police and paramilitary groups as well as American special forces like the Green Berets. If the Soviets or their allies entered wars of liberation, United States commandos would be ready to fight back.

Kennedy believed, too, that the Soviets had made space the final frontier of the cold war. Only a few months after the president’s inauguration, a Russian cosmonaut orbited the world for the first time. In response Kennedy challenged Congress to authorize a manned space mission to the moon that would land by the end of the decade. In February 1962 John Glenn circled the earth three times in a “fireball of a ride.” Gradually, the American space program gained on the Russians’.

Cold War Frustrations >> Kennedy had little success in countering “wars of liberation.” The Eisenhower administration had authorized the CIA to overthrow Fidel Castro’s Communist regime in Cuba, 90 miles south of Florida. Eager to establish his own cold war credentials, Kennedy approved an attack by a 1,400-member army of Cuban exiles in April 1961. The invasion turned into a mismanaged disaster. The poorly equipped rebel forces landed at the swampy Bay of Pigs, and no discontented rebels flocked to their support. Within two days Castro’s army had rounded them up. Taking responsibility for the fiasco, Kennedy suffered a bitter humiliation.

Kennedy’s advisers took a similar covert approach in South Vietnam. There, the American-backed prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem (see page 601), grew more unpopular by the month. South Vietnamese Communists, known as the National Liberation Front (NLF), waged a guerrilla war against Diem with support from North Vietnam. Buddhists and other groups backed



MAP 28.4: THE WORLD OF THE SUPERPOWERS

This map shows the extent of the cold war Soviet and American military buildup. The United States established a worldwide network of bases and alliances surrounding Soviet bloc nations that extended from Japan and South Korea, South Vietnam, Pakistan, and Turkey in Asia to the nations of the NATO alliance in Europe. Soviet efforts to expand its influence in the Third World led to the creation of an outpost in Cuba. Around these strategic perimeters, hot spots and centers of crisis continued to simmer.

Why did the Soviet Union have so many bases on its border with China, even though it was another Communist nation?

the rebellion, since Diem, a Catholic, ruthlessly persecuted them. In May 1961, a month after the Bay of Pigs invasion, Kennedy secretly ordered 500 Green Berets and military advisers to Vietnam to prop up Diem. By 1963 the number of “military advisers” had risen to more than 16,000.

As the situation degenerated, Diem’s corruption and police–state tactics made it unlikely he could defeat the Vietcong. Thus the Kennedy administration tacitly encouraged the military to stage a coup. The

plotter captured Diem and, to Washington’s surprise, shot him in November 1963. Despite Kennedy’s policy of pragmatic idealism, the United States found itself mired in a Vietnamese civil war, in which it had no clear strategy for winning.

Confronting Khrushchev >> Vietnam and Cuba were just two areas in the Third World where the Kennedy administration sought to battle Communist forces. But the conflict between the United States and

the Soviet Union soon overshadowed developments in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

In June 1961 a summit held in Vienna gave the president his first chance to take the measure of Nikita Khrushchev. For two long days, Khrushchev was brash and belligerent. East and West Germany must be reunited, he demanded. The problem of Berlin, where dissatisfied East Germans were fleeing to the city's free western zone, must be settled within six months. Kennedy left Vienna worried that the Soviet leader perceived him as weak and inexperienced. By August events in Berlin confirmed his fears. The Soviets threw up a heavily guarded wall sealing off the enclave of West Berlin from the rest of the eastern zone. Despite American protests, the wall stayed up.

Tensions with the Soviet Union also led the administration to rethink the American approach to nuclear warfare. Under the Dulles doctrine of massive retaliation, almost any incident threatened to trigger a full launch of nuclear missiles. Kennedy and McNamara sought to establish a "flexible response doctrine" that would limit the level of a first nuclear strike and thus leave room for negotiation.

But what if the Soviets launched a first-strike attack to knock out American missiles? A flexible

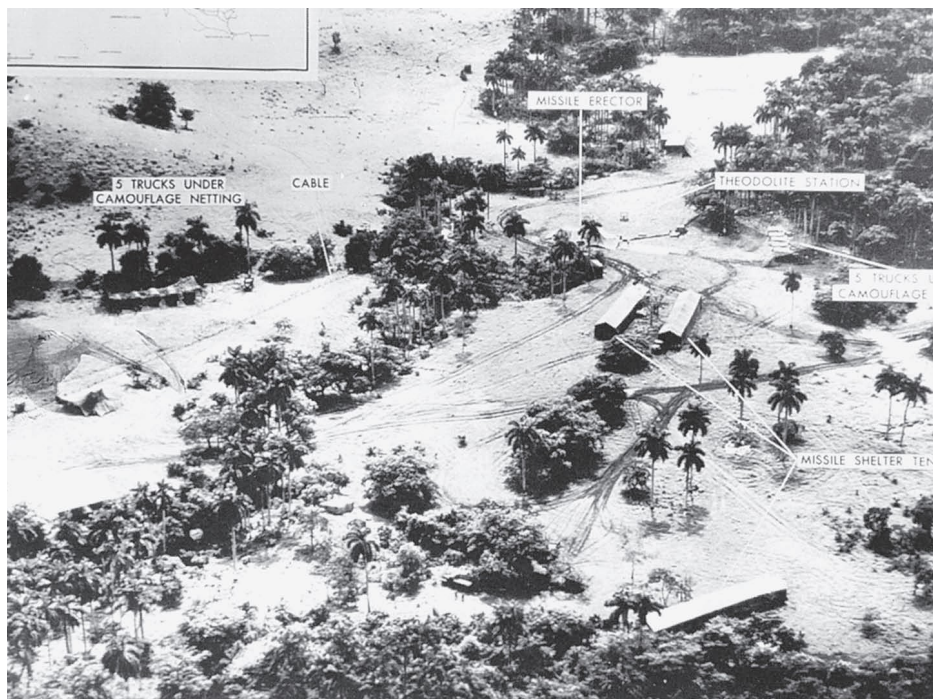
mutually assured destruction (MAD) national defense strategy in which a nuclear attack by one side would inevitably trigger an equal response leading to the destruction of both the attacker and the defender.

response policy required that enough American missiles survive in order to retaliate. So McNamara began a program to bury missile sites underground and develop submarine-launched missiles. **Mutually assured destruction**

(MAD) would deter a Soviet threat. The new approach resulted in a 15 percent increase in the 1961 military budget, compared with only 2 percent increases during the last two years of Eisenhower's term.

The Missiles of October >>The peril of nuclear confrontation became dramatically clear in the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. President Kennedy had warned repeatedly that the United States would treat any attempt to place offensive weapons in Cuba as an unacceptable threat. Khrushchev pledged that the Soviet Union had no such intention but bristled privately at this concession. In May 1962 he ordered the building of a secret nuclear base in Cuba. Throughout the summer the buildup went largely undetected by Americans. But by October 14, overflights of Cuba by U-2 spy planes had uncovered the offensive missile sites. Kennedy was outraged.

For a week American security advisers secretly debated a course of action. The Joint Chiefs of Staff



▲ The discovery of Soviet offensive missile sites in Cuba, revealed by low-level American reconnaissance flights, led to the first nuclear showdown of the cold war. For several tense days in October 1962, President Kennedy met with his National Security Council to debate the proper course of action.

urged air strikes against the missile sites, and at first Kennedy agreed. "We're certainly going to... take out these... missiles," he said. But other advisers pointed out that the U-2 flights had not photographed all of Cuba. What if there were more concealed bases with missiles ready to fire? The Soviets could then launch an atomic attack on the United States despite the air



▲ The Women Strike for Peace organization spoke out during the Cuban missile crisis.

strikes. Kennedy finally chose the more restrained option of a naval blockade to intercept “all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba.”

On October 22 word of the confrontation began to leak out. “CAPITAL CRISIS AIR HINTS AT DEVELOPMENTS ON CUBA, KENNEDY TV TALK IS LIKELY,” headlined *The New York Times*. In Moscow, Soviet leaders were convinced that an American invasion of Cuba was likely. “The thing is we were not going to unleash war,” a nervous Khrushchev complained, “we just wanted to intimidate them, to deter the anti-Cuban forces.” Americans were stunned that evening by the president’s television address.

Over the next few days, tensions mounted as a Soviet submarine approached the line of American ships. On October 25 the navy stopped an oil tanker. Several Soviet ships reversed course. In Cuba, Soviet general Issa Pliyev assumed the worst—that in addition to the blockade, an American invasion of Cuba was being secretly prepared. The attack was expected “in the night between October 26 and October 27 or at dawn on October 27,” he said, in a coded message to Moscow. Equally ominously, he added, “We have taken measures to disperse ‘techniki’ [the nuclear warheads] in the zone of operations.” In other words, Pliyev was making his nuclear missiles operational.

The morning of October 27 alarmed Soviet technicians detected a U-2 spy plane over Cuba. Was this the beginning of the expected attack? General Pliyev had issued strict instructions not to use force without his go-ahead, but when the air defense command looked to consult him, he could not be found, and the U-2 would leave Cuban airspace at any moment. Soviet officers went ahead and shot it down, killing its pilot.

Meanwhile, Kennedy was seeking urgently to resolve the crisis through diplomatic channels. Worried that events might spiral out of control, the president put off a decision on the U-2 incident until the following morning.

He decided to accept a secret offer from Khrushchev to remove Soviet missiles, in return for an American pledge not to invade Cuba. Kennedy also gave private assurances that U.S. missiles pointed at the Soviet Union, stationed in Turkey, would be removed within half a year. In Moscow, Khrushchev agreed reluctantly to the deal, telling his advisers somberly that there were times to advance and times to retreat, and this time “we found ourselves face to face with the danger of war and of nuclear catastrophe, with the possible result of destroying the human race.” The face-off ended on terms that saved both sides from overt humiliation.

The nuclear showdown prompted Kennedy to seek ways to control the nuclear arms race. “We all inhabit this small planet,” he warned in June 1963. “We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.” The administration negotiated a nuclear test ban with the Soviets, prohibiting all

aboveground nuclear tests. At the same time, Kennedy’s prestige soared for “standing up” to the Soviets.

✓ REVIEW

How did crises in Berlin and Cuba push President Kennedy to change cold war policies?

The Cuban missile crisis was the closest the world had come to “destroying the human race,” in Khrushchev’s words. Such a close call sobered the superpowers. It did not, however, end the cold war. Ahead lay long, bloody regional wars—for the United States, in Vietnam; for the Soviet Union, in Afghanistan; and elsewhere, between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Conservatives would continue to press for victory in the cold war, but never again would the two superpowers stand so close to the brink of an atomic war. The nuclear anxieties of the 1950s—so much a part of the suburban era—gave way to different, equally urgent concerns in the 1960s.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

At midcentury, during an era of peace and prosperity, the United States began to build a new social and political agenda.

- Automobiles and the culture of the highways helped bind Americans to one another in a “consensus” about what it meant to be an American.
- Highways made possible rapid suburban growth.
- Suburbs proved popular with the growing white-collar middle class.
- Consensus in suburbs blurred class distinctions and promoted the notion of “civil religion.”
- Suburban life nurtured the ideal of the woman who found fulfillment as a homemaker and a mother, even though more women began to work outside the home.
- President Eisenhower resisted the demands of conservatives to dismantle the New Deal and of liberals to extend it, in favor of moderate, or “middle-of-the-road,” Republicanism.
- Cracks in the consensus appeared among discontented intellectuals and among teenagers who, through Elvis Presley and new teen idols, discovered the power of rock and roll.
- Efforts to more vigorously contain the U.S.S.R. and Communist China through a policy of “brinkmanship” proved difficult to apply because of growing Third World nationalism.
- Eisenhower held back from using tactical nuclear weapons during crises in Vietnam and Taiwan.

- Successful CIA operations in Iran and Guatemala encouraged American policy makers to use covert operations more frequently.
- Postcolonial nationalism contributed to crises in Hungary, Egypt, and Cuba, where President Kennedy was embarrassed by the failure of an invasion attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro.
- Relations between the two superpowers thawed gradually but not without recurring confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union.
- Under Eisenhower, the Soviet success with *Sputnik* increased fears that the United States was vulnerable to missile attacks, while the U-2 spy plane incident worsened relations.
- John F. Kennedy proved willing to use covert operations as well as diplomatic and economic initiatives like the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress.
- The construction of Soviet missile bases 90 miles from American shores triggered the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the closest the United States and the Soviet Union ever came to nuclear war.

Additional Reading

David Halberstam profiles suburban America engagingly in *The Fifties* (1994); using suburban Orange County, California, as her focus, Lisa McGirr looks at conservative grassroots organization in *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2001). For a fresh environmental perspective, see Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (2001). Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (1998), dissects the popular aesthetics of the era. For popular culture, see Glenn Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock and Roll Changed America* (2003). As a corrective to the view of women in the 1950s popularized by Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), see the provocative essays in Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America* (1994).

Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (rev. ed., 1994), contradicts the view of Ike as a bumbling president. Historians have also refurbished Kennedy's reputation. See, for example, Graham Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2nd ed., 1999); and Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy, the Middle East, and the Making of the U.S. Israel Alliance* (2003). Two fine books on Kennedy and Vietnam are Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (2003); and David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (2002).

Significant Events

