

The 1950s Part Two: The Affluent Society

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TOP: A family watches television in 1958; National Archives and Records Administration. MIDDLE: Aerial view of a suburban housing development with rows of similar houses, 1955; Lambert/Getty Images. BOTTOM: The cover of the anti-communist comic book "Is This Tomorrow," 1947; Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

The second in a three-part series

In the years following World War II, the United States became much richer very quickly. To many, the change seemed miraculous. Average family income grew as much in the 10 years after the war as it had grown in the previous 50 years combined. Between 1940 and 1965, average family incomes almost tripled.

These years also saw a significant decrease in poverty in America. The percentage of families below the official poverty line in 1950 was 30 percent. By 1960 it had dropped to 22 percent and by the 1960s, it had dropped to under 14 percent. Between 1950 and 1970, in other words, poverty declined by over 60 percent.

During those years, many claimed that as America was becoming wealthier, it was also becoming more “equal,” meaning that the gap between ordinary Americans and the very rich was shrinking. In fact, that was not true. There was no significant change in the wealth gap during the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, there was simply an increase in the total amount of wealth. The wealthy and the poor experienced roughly the same rates of growth.

Causes of the postwar economic boom

What is true, however, is that the rich did not become richer in comparison to everyone else. This was very different from what happened in later years. Since the mid-1970s, the very rich in this country have won an ever-increasing share of the national wealth, and fewer gains have been going to everyone else.

What caused the remarkable economic growth of the postwar years? One important factor was increased government spending. During the early 1950s, most of this increase came from military spending on the Korean War. After the war ended, the government began to spend heavily on highway and home construction. The government helped returning soldiers attend college and buy homes, and it also sponsored scientific research, in particular work related to the growing space program. All this government spending led to greater opportunities and more jobs.

Another cause of the postwar economic boom was the tremendous increase in the birth rate, known as the “baby boom.” In the late 1940s and 1950s the U.S. population grew at twice the rate it had grown in the 1930s. The rapidly increasing population led to an increased demand for all sorts of goods and services, which in turn led to new jobs.

Moving to the suburbs



Changes in where Americans lived also helped create new wealth. During the 1950s, 18 million people — 10 percent of the population — moved to the new suburbs that were springing up outside of big cities. The American population as a whole grew 19 percent during these years, but the suburban population grew 47 percent. Suburbs created a vast new market. New homes had to be constructed and furnished, new highways had to be built, new cars had to be bought and so on.

The growing power of unions, groups that represented workers, was another important cause of the country's increasing wealth. Strong unions allowed workers to win better wages and benefits, and helped pull many working people out of poverty.

The combined economic effect of all of these changes was a radical shift in the American lifestyle. Many Americans came to consider wealth the norm, and to believe that the ability to improve the quality of one's life was a basic right.

Capitalism gains support

The growth of America's economy also affected public ideas about capitalism. Under this type of political and economic system, a country's business and trade are controlled by private owners, rather than by the government. America's prosperity led many to believe that capitalism was capable of much greater successes that were once thought possible. They believed it could be the key to permanent growth and stability.

During the postwar years, there was rapid growth in the number of people able to afford a "middle-class" standard of living. Home ownership rose from 40 percent in 1945 to 60 percent in 1960. By 1960, 75 percent of all families owned a car, 87 percent owned a television and 75 percent owned a washing machine.

However, not everyone shared in the good times. Some 25 to 40 percent of the population still remained outside the middle class. More than 23 percent of Americans still lived in poverty, and for African-Americans in particular, the rate was much higher than that.

Innocent people caught up in Red Scare

The 1950s were good times for many middle-class white Americans. However, they were not good times for those who thought, looked or acted differently.



Perhaps the major reason for this is that the United States was then locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, a group of republics controlled by Russia. The Cold War was not an actual war, but a struggle for influence around the world. The U.S. government was eager to stop the spread of communism, a political and economic system under which the government owns all of the property. This was the system governing the Soviet Union and a number of other

countries, including China. As a result, people who criticized the U.S. government or who wanted social change were often accused of being communist agents secretly working for Russia or China. Many innocent people were caught up in this so-called Red Scare. Writers were banned simply for speaking out against injustices, and television reporters were silenced.

1950s viewed as a golden age

Today, many people still look back at the 1950s as a golden age. In many ways, it was. Yet there were deep problems and terrible injustices hidden away under the era's happy, bright surface. Many people still remained poor. Life was hard and deeply unfair for African-Americans, who were still not granted equal rights. Those who spoke out against injustice could be branded communist agents and see their lives ruined.

Nonetheless, the postwar era was undeniably a remarkable period in which many Americans were lifted out of poverty. It was during these years that the United States became the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

Alan Brinkley is a professor of American history at Columbia University. He is the author of several books, including "Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression" (1982), which received the National Book Award for History; "The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War" (1994); "Liberalism and its Discontents" (1998); "Franklin D. Roosevelt" (2009) and "John F. Kennedy" (2012).