Affluence and Its Discontents, 1953–1963

The Queen of Abundance
The double-store, frost-free refrigerator offered consumers an elegant display case for the new prepackaged and frozen food products that became available during the 1950s. Advertisements such as this one proclaimed that Americans had become a “people of plenty.”
With the end of the fighting in Korea in 1953, Cold War tensions somewhat abated. A new U.S. president, Dwight David Eisenhower (1953–61), modulated the pitch of the anticommunist rhetoric coming from the White House. Yet he and his successor, John F. Kennedy (1961–63), pledged not only to continue a global anticommunist foreign policy but to take it in new directions.

At home, Ike and JFK supported, with differing degrees of enthusiasm, efforts to extend some of the domestic programs initiated during the 1930s and 1940s. Sustained economic growth during the late 1950s and early 1960s encouraged talk about an age of “affluence.” It also generated concern about the spread of social conformity, the behavior and cultural tastes of young people, and the impact of commercial mass culture. At the same time, discussions about the distribution of the nation’s economic bounty and movements to end racial discrimination triggered new debates over the ways in which the use of governmental power might affect how people understood—and enjoyed—liberty and equality.
Foreign Policy, 1953–1960

**Focus Question**

*In what ways did the “New Look” reorient the foreign policy of containment?*

The U.S. strategy for containing communism began shifting focus and direction during the 1950s. Bipolar confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union over European issues continued alongside greater attention to building up nuclear arsenals and directing often-subtle power plays in the Third World: the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

**Eisenhower Takes Command**

Eisenhower honored a campaign pledge by personally traveling to Korea, in hope of speeding the end of U.S. military involvement there. Negotiations to conclude the Korean War temporarily broke down, however, over whether or not North Korean and Chinese prisoners of war (POWs) could choose to remain in South Korea. Anxious to conclude matters, Eisenhower began to hint about using nuclear weapons if diplomacy failed. Talks soon resumed, and on July 27, 1953, both sides signed a truce that established a commission of neutral nations to handle the POW issue. (The POWs were subsequently allowed to determine whether they wished to be repatriated to their own countries.) A conflict during which more than 2 million Asians, mostly noncombatants, and 53,000 Americans died finally ended. A formal peace treaty remained unsigned, however, and the 38th parallel, which divided North and South Korea, became one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world.

At home, Ike gradually wrested control of the national security issue from more militant anticommunists, including Senator Joseph McCarthy. A Republican-controlled Congress did exceed the wishes of the Eisenhower administration when it passed the Communist Control Act of 1954. This measure barred the American Communist Party from running candidates in elections and extended the registration provisions of the 1950 McCarran Act. With a GOP president and a former general in the White House, however, most Republicans began to inch away from aggressively confrontational styles of anticommunist politics.

Joe McCarthy finally careened out of control. While heading up a special Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, popularly known as the “McCarthy Committee,” the senator enjoyed broad subpoena powers and legal immunity from libel suits. He could charge reluctant witnesses with selling out their country and lead sympathetic ones through stories about a vast Red Menace. After differences with military officials prompted McCarthy to speculate about subversives in the U.S. Army, a Senate committee conducted a televised investigation into his charges. Under the glare of TV lights, McCarthy allowed himself to play the role of a crude bully, who carelessly hurled wild slanders in every direction. In March 1954, the veteran journalist Edward R. Murrow devoted one of his “See It Now” TV programs to a dissection of McCarthy. Borrowing a tactic from McCarthy’s own political playbook, other critics even hinted that the senator and his aides seemed lacking in “manliness.” Finally, in late 1954, McCarthy’s U.S. Senate colleagues approved, by a margin of 65 to 22, a resolution censuring him for “unbecoming” conduct. McCarthyism began receding to the fringes of domestic political culture, and McCarthy faded from the limelight. He would die, in 1957, while still a seldom-noticed member of the senate.
Meanwhile, the Eisenhower administration crafted its own national security agenda. Coming in the wake of the bombast of McCarthyism, its relatively low-key style of anticommunism could seem eminently reasonable and moderate. The apparent unreliability of legislators such as McCarthy strengthened the case for the White House when it asserted a constitutional privilege to withhold classified national security materials from Congress. Eisenhower generally refrained, however, from vigorously pressing claims about presidential power, as Truman had done in the “steel seizure case” of 1952, and avoided any serious legal-constitutional confrontations with the judiciary.

Relatively free from congressional and judicial oversight, the Eisenhower administration extended earlier programs of domestic surveillance and of covert action overseas. It also backed a secret program to develop new aerial surveillance capabilities; by 1956, intelligence photographs taken from the new **U-2 spy planes** provided U.S. strategists with a clear view of the Soviet arsenal.

**AMERICANS ABROAD**

**Willis Conover: Fighting the Cold War with Musical Culture**

Although some members of Congress dismissed jazz as “pure noise” and complained about the U.S. government broadcasting anything so trivial, Cold War informational experts recognized the cultural value of jazz. They promoted it as genuinely **American** music, a symbol of individuality and free expression. The global popularity of jazz, which greatly exceeded its appeal at home, seemed boundless. According to **Look** magazine, “Jazz is a door opener everywhere, a Pandora’s box full of friendliness that totalitarians won’t easily be able to close.” Conover, opening his program each night with “Take the ‘A’ Train,” Ellington’s signature tune, brought jazz to the world and nurtured an international fascination with U.S. culture.
hand presidency.” Mindful of how the pugnacious style of his predecessor had often dragged Harry Truman into partisan disputes and political scandals, Ike carefully guarded his personal popularity and reputation. To do this, he preferred to remain in the background of public controversies and project an air of calm steadiness, which sometimes bordered on the aloof. In foreign policy, he usually allowed John Foster Dulles, his secretary of state from 1953 to 1959, to take center stage. Ike also encouraged the idea that George Humphrey, his secretary of the treasury, and Sherman Adams, his chief of staff, looked after domestic matters.

The New Look, Global Alliances, and Summits

Generally working behind the scenes, Eisenhower oversaw a refashioning of the nation’s anticommunist foreign policy. To begin, he allowed Secretary of State Dulles to warn, repeatedly, that Washington would consider adopting measures to “rollback,” rather than simply to contain, communism. This approach differed from one that international observers, such as Britain’s Winston Churchill, suggested. In their view, the change of leadership in Moscow, following the 1953 death of Joseph Stalin, created opportunities for significantly reducing Cold War tensions. Nikita Khrushchev, who would eventually emerge as the new Soviet leader, did talk about “peaceful coexistence.” Seeking to free up resources to produce more consumer goods, Khrushchev also inaugurated reductions in the USSR’s armed forces.

Meanwhile, the Eisenhower administration undertook a review and a subsequent revision of U.S. military and strategic policies. The head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged cutting back the U.S. military budget and emphasizing nuclear weaponry and air power. Dubbed the “New Look,” these changes dovetailed with Eisenhower’s concern that spiraling military expenditures might eventually strangle economic growth. The president, despite his background in the Army, came to rely on advanced nuclear capabilities, to deemphasize costly ground forces, and to listen attentively to the Air Force’s “bomber generals,” such as Curtis LeMay, who headed the Strategic Air Command (SAC). In addition, advocates of the New Look stressed the value of covert action, cultural outreach, and economic pressure.

Under Eisenhower, the United States elevated psychological warfare and “informational” programs into major Cold War weapons. The government-run Voice of America extended the reach of its radio broadcasts and increased the number of languages in which it programmed. Washington also secretly funded Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty (beamed to the Soviet Union), and Radio Asia, all ostensibly privately run ventures. In 1953, Eisenhower persuaded Congress to create the United States Information Agency (USIA), an executive-branch office that coordinated anticommunist informational and propaganda campaigns.

A key centerpiece of the New Look, the doctrine of “massive retaliation,” gambled that the threat of unleashing U.S. nuclear weaponry would check Soviet expansion. The administration publicly hinted that it would not hesitate, in any future confrontation involving communist military moves and U.S. national security, to launch a nuclear attack against the USSR. Secretly, it drew up plans for such an eventuality. To extend the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the Eisenhower administration placed additional weapons under the direct control of military commanders, particularly those in SAC.

Eisenhower’s administration also concluded a set of global military alliances. It expanded NATO to include West Germany in 1955 and added two other mutual defense pacts with noncommunist nations in Central and Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), formed in 1954, linked the United States to Australia, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand. The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), created in 1959, aligned the United States with Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Great Britain.

Simultaneously trying to soothe relations with the USSR, Eisenhower also stressed the importance of negotiations, including high-level “summit meetings,” with the Soviets. In May 1955, U.S. and Soviet leaders decided finally to end the postwar occupation of Austria and to transform it into an independent and neutral nation. Two months later, the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France met in Geneva, Switzerland, and agreed to inaugurate cultural exchanges as one way of reducing Cold War suspicions. Some optimistic observers even began to talk about the reconciliatory “spirit of Geneva.” During the fall of 1959, as a way of healing recent rifts over the future of a still-divided Berlin, Khrushchev toured the United States. His most publicized stops included a farm in Iowa, a Hollywood studio, and Disneyland. Although a 1960 Paris summit meeting fell apart, amidst a bitter war of words, after the Soviets shot down a U-2 spy plane over their territory, the tone of Cold War rhetoric seemed to grow somewhat less strident during Eisenhower’s eight years in office.

The two superpowers even began to consider how they might reduce their stockpiles of nuclear weaponry. Eisenhower’s “Open Skies” initiative of 1955 proposed mutual reconnaissance flights over each other’s territory to verify disarmament efforts. Always suspicious and hyper-secretive, the Soviet leadership balked at this idea,
but the rival nations did make some progress toward limiting atomic testing. Responding to the health hazards of radioactive fallout, both slowed the pace of aboveground testing and even discussed a broader test-ban agreement.

For some Americans, however, these efforts came far too late. Government documents finally declassified in the 1980s confirmed suspicions that people who had lived “downwind” from nuclear test sites during the 1940s and 1950s had contracted a disproportionate number of atomic-related illnesses. Subsequent revelations also showed that the U.S. government had covertly conducted experiments with radioactive materials on unsuspecting citizens.

Meanwhile, events in Eastern Europe tested the likelihood of the United States and the USSR actually squaring off, militarily, there. By the mid-1950s, many of the Soviet-dominated “satellite” countries in that region resented their badly managed communist economies and detested their police-state regimes, ultimately supported by Moscow’s military might. Seizing on hints of what appeared to be a post-Stalin relaxation of the USSR’s heavy hand, insurgents in Poland staged a brief rebellion in June 1956. They forced the Soviets to accept Władysław Gomułka, an old foe of Stalin, as Poland’s head of state. Hungarians then rallied in support of Imre Nagy, another anti-Stalinist communist, who pledged to create a multiparty political system. After failed attempts at finding some accommodation, which would have preserved Moscow’s power over Hungary, Soviet military forces moved against the new Hungarian government.

The Hungarian insurgents appealed to the United States for assistance. They apparently took seriously earlier U.S. calls, especially by Secretary of State Dulles, for “rolling back” Soviet power and “liberating” Eastern Europe. More cautious U.S. military strategists, however, recognized the danger of mounting a U.S. military operation in Eastern Europe, so close to Soviet territory. Soviet armies brutally crushed the Hungarian uprising, killing thousands of people, including Nagy. Anticommunist critics of rollback rhetoric suggested that the failed Hungarian Revolution showed how advocating a policy that moved beyond containment might secure political advantage at home but produce tragedy abroad.

Covert Action and Economic Leverage

Meanwhile, the U.S. campaign to contain communism shifted toward the Third World. As it did, covert action and economic pressure, less visible and less expensive than military deployments, became major policy tools. Using secretive operations and economic diplomacy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the Eisenhower administration reasoned, seemed less likely to provoke domestic political controversies or showdowns with the Soviets.

The CIA, headed by Allen Dulles, brother of the secretary of state, played a key role in U.S. policy in the Third World during the 1950s. In 1953, the CIA helped engineer the election of the strongly anticommunist Ramón Magsaysay as president of the Philippines. That same year, the CIA facilitated a coup in Iran, which overthrew Mohammed Mossadegh’s constitutional government, after it threatened to nationalize Iran’s oil industry, and restored Shah Reza Pahlavi to power. Increasingly dictatorial in his domestic policies, the Shah assured Eisenhower that Iran would remain a firm ally of Washington and a close friend to oil interests in the United States and Europe. (The Shah remained in power until ousted in 1979 in another coup, this time led by Islamic fundamentalists.)

The CIA continually expanded its global reach and its influence within the Eisenhower administration. In 1954, CIA operatives secretly helped topple President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán’s elected government in Guatemala. Officials in Washington and executives of the United Fruit Company desired the ouster of Arbenz, whose broad support included that of Guatemala’s Communist Party. Using up-to-date informational strategies, including phony newscasts created by the U.S. advertising industry, the CIA undermined domestic support for Arbenz, who had promised a program to nationalize and redistribute large tracts of Guatemalan land owned by United Fruit.

Impressed by what the Iranian and Guatemalan operations appeared to suggest about the potential of covert action, the National Security Council secretly widened the CIA’s mandate. By 1960, the CIA deployed approximately 15,000 agents around the world, compared to only 6,000 when Eisenhower took office.

Eisenhower also employed new economic strategies—trade and aid—to fight communism and win Third World converts to the U.S. cause. Governmental economic initiatives sought to open new opportunities for U.S. enterprises overseas, discourage other countries from adopting state-directed economic systems, and encourage expanded trade ties. Those who supported these efforts credited U.S. policy with encouraging greater stability in recipient countries. Critics at home and abroad noted, however, that U.S. aid programs could seem heavy-handed and often alienated Third World leaders by equating “freedom” only with free-market economic policies that U.S. investors favored.

U.S. military aid to the Third World rose even more sharply than economic assistance. Under a Mutual Security and Military Assistance Program, the United States
spent $3 billion annually, instructed Third World governments in anticommmunist policies, trained their military forces, and advised their domestic police forces. The buildup of armaments in Third World nations did provide the United States with stronger anticommmunist allies but also contributed to the development of military dictatorships.

The United States and Third World Politics, 1953–1960

In pursuing its policies in Third World areas, the Eisenhower administration employed a broad definition of “communist.” In many nations emerging from colonialism, groups advocating labor rights and land redistribution sometimes did ally with local communist movements. Their domestic political opponents could thus hope to win U.S. support by mentioning the word communist, especially to people in Washington, D.C.

Latin America

In Latin America, the Eisenhower White House favored autocratic regimes that welcomed U.S. economic investment and opposed leftist political movements. Eisenhower publicly honored unpopular dictators in Peru and Venezuela and privately confessed admiration for the anticommmunist politics of Paraguay’s General Alfredo Stroessner, who sheltered German-Nazi fugitives and ran his country much as if it were a private fiefdom. Eisenhower’s administration continued to cultivate close ties with Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Batista also enjoyed strong support from U.S. crime syndicates, which controlled the Cuba’s gambling industry, and from the CIA, which secretly trained his repressive security forces.

The backlash against U.S. policy boosted the appeal of “yankeeophobia” in much of Latin America. Two important events of the late 1950s dramatized the growing unpopularity that U.S. policy makers now faced throughout much of the southern part of the Western Hemisphere.

When Vice-President Richard Nixon visited this region on a 1958 goodwill tour, he generally encountered ill will. Constantly escalating protest demonstrations reached their climax during Nixon’s last stop, in Caracas, Venezuela. At one point, protestors surrounded the vice-president’s motorcade, laid siege to his Cadillac limousine, and forced Nixon, hustled to safety by armed Secret Service agents, to take refuge in the U.S. Embassy.

Events in Havana, Cuba, the following year, added substance to the symbolism of Caracas. A relatively broad-based Cuban opposition movement, headed by a charismatic revolutionary named Fidel Castro, toppled Batista’s pro-U.S. regime in December 1959. Once in control, Castro promised to reduce Cuba’s dependence on the United States and to create a state-directed economic system, one he claimed would improve living conditions for most Cubans. These policies, together with Castro’s own increasingly autocratic rule, prompted many of Cuba’s more affluent citizens to depart for Florida, and the Eisenhower administration to impose an economic boycott against Cuba. Castro turned to the Soviet Union, declared his allegiance to Marxist doctrine, moved against political dissent at home, and pledged support for Cuban-style insurgencies throughout Latin America.

The Eisenhower administration began laying down a two-track response. First, it reconsidered U.S. policies that seemed to have been generating animosity and sparking anti-U.S. political movements throughout Latin America. This review ultimately recommended that Washington start encouraging democratic political processes, protection for human rights, and policies of economic growth. At the same time, Allan Dulles and the CIA were working on their own initiatives toward Cuba and Castro. Looking back at earlier operations and surveying current assets, including its contacts in organized crime, the CIA began planning how best to depose the Cuban leader, who was becoming an increasingly visible symbol of opposition to U.S. policies on the world stage.

The Middle East, Asia, and Africa

Meanwhile, a growing distrust of nationalism and neutralism shaped U.S. policy toward the Middle East. In 1954, after Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser led a successful military coup in Egypt, against a corrupt monarchy closely tied to Great Britain, he promised to help rescue other Arab nations from European domination and guide them toward policies of “positive neutralism” in the Cold War. Nasser denounced Israel, boosted Egypt’s economic and military power, extended diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic of China, and purchased advanced weapons from communist Czechoslovakia.

The Eisenhower administration viewed these policies as neither positive nor neutral. It quickly cancelled the U.S. loans intended to finance construction of the Aswan Dam, which Egypt hoped to make the centerpiece of a project designed to improve agriculture along the Nile River and to provide power for new Egyptian industries. Nasser responded, in July 1956, by seizing the British-controlled Suez Canal, which connected the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, as a way of gaining new revenues and prestige for Egypt. The Suez also remained of both economic and symbolic importance to Britain, and its forces, joined by
The creation of Israel and the Suez Crisis of 1956 shaped international politics in the Middle East in the postwar era. This map helps suggest some reasons why the establishment of Israel sharpened Arab nationalism and why the Suez Canal was considered to be such an important strategic location.

those of France and Israel, attacked Egypt in October and quickly seized back the canal. Observers of the international scene talked about “the Suez Crisis.”

Eisenhower distrusted Nasser, but he opposed Britain’s blatant attempt to retain its imperial position in the Middle East. Denouncing the Anglo-French-Israeli action, which coincided with the Soviet Union’s brutal campaign to shore up its communist empire by crushing Hungary, the U.S. president threatened to destabilize Britain’s currency unless the invasion ended. Eventually, a plan supported by the United States and the UN gave Egypt control over the Suez Canal, but U.S. influence in the area still suffered, particularly after the Soviet Union took over the financing for the Aswan Dam.

With Nasser-style nationalism now seeming to lean toward the USSR, the Eisenhower administration came to fear the spread of “Nasserism” throughout the energy-rich Middle East. In spring 1957, the president’s “Eisenhower Doctrine” pledged that the United States would defend Middle Eastern countries “against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism.” When ruling elites in Lebanon and Jordan faced potential revolts by domestic forces friendly to Nasser, Eisenhower dispatched U.S. Marines to Lebanon, and Britain helped Jordan’s King Hussein retain his throne.

The Eisenhower administration moved with similar determination elsewhere in the Third World. It remained steadfast in its policy of trying to squelch political movements it considered too closely tied to communism. In 1958, for example, the CIA furnished planes and pilots to rebels trying to overthrow Ahmed Sukarno, leader of Indonesia, who drew support from that nation’s large Communist Party. The rebellion failed, and Sukarno tightened his grip on power. CIA operatives also became involved in a plan to eliminate Patrice Lumumba in the Congo. Lumumba’s opponents killed the popular black nationalist leader in January 1961, but scholars still debate the CIA’s precise role in precipitating his death.

**Vietnam**

Eisenhower’s effort to thwart communism and nationalism in the Third World set the stage for a more thorough commitment in Indochina. There, communist-nationalist forces led by Ho Chi Minh (born Nguyen Tat Thanh) continued to seek independence from France. Ho Chi Minh had studied in the Soviet Union and in France before returning to Indochina in 1941 to fight against the Japanese armies that had overrun this French colony. When Japan withdrew at war’s end, Ho had appealed to the United States to back independence for Indochina. Despite wartime criticism of European colonialism, U.S. leaders supported the return of French rule. In 1946, Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh forces went to war against France and its ally, Bao Dai, the Paris-educated Vietnamese emperor who had reigned since the 1920s.

Despite U.S. willingness to finance its military operations, France could not retain its hold over Indochina. A stunning 1954 Vietminh victory, orchestrated by General Vo Nguyen Giap, at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, convinced France to begin pulling out of Indochina. The Geneva Peace Accords of 1954, which the United States ultimately refused to sign, ended France’s colonial regime and divided the old Indochina into three sovereign nations: Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The accords further split Vietnam into two jurisdictions—North Vietnam and South Vietnam—until a future, nationwide election could create a government that would unify it as a single country.

Eisenhower’s advisers feared that events in Vietnam, where Ho Chi Minh stood poised to win any electoral contest, could set off a geopolitical chain reaction. Using now-familiar Cold War language, the White House insisting that “the loss of any of the countries of Southeast Asia to Communist aggression” would ultimately “endanger the stability and security” of Europe and Japan, a formulation
becoming known as the “domino theory.” As Ho Chi Minh's communist government consolidated control over North Vietnam, Eisenhower supported creation of a non-communist state in South Vietnam.

Ike additionally ordered, in advance of the planned reunification election, covert operations and economic programs throughout South Vietnam. In late 1954, Washington dispatched to South Vietnam Colonel Edward Lansdale, who had directed the CIA's campaign against the leftist insurgency in the Philippines from 1950 to 1953. Lansdale helped oversee creation in Saigon, South Vietnam's capital city, of the pro-U.S. government headed by Ngo Dinh Diem, an anticommunist Catholic who had been educated in the United States. Lansdale also took charge of covert activities against anti-Diem factions, especially those loyal to Ho Chi Minh.

At first, the U.S.-directed effort at nation-building seemed to make headway. With Washington’s concurrence, Diem's regime renounced the Geneva Peace Accords and refused to participate in any national election intended to establish a unified Vietnamese government. Diem extended his own government's authority over South Vietnam, redistributed land formerly owned by the French, augmented his military forces, and even launched an industrialization program.

Diem's authoritarian policies, together with opposition from North Vietnam, soon undermined the stability of his government. Diem alienated much of South Vietnam's predominantly Buddhist population, and his narrowing circle of political allies became best known for their notorious corruption. With encouragement and material support from North Vietnam, Vietminh loyalists in the South spearheaded opposition to Diem. As time passed, Diem grew increasingly isolated from key constituencies in his struggling nation and progressively more dependent on U.S. support. Early on, French officials had warned their U.S. counterparts of Diem's liabilities, but the Eisenhower administration could see no alternative. It sent billions of U.S. dollars and military advisers to prop up his government.

Eisenhower struggled to frame a coherent U.S. policy toward Vietnam. Ike had once claimed that U.S. military involvement there would be a “tragedy” and had rebuffed, in 1954, advisers who urged direct U.S. military intervention, including even the possible use of atomic weapons, on behalf of France. Following French withdrawal from Indochina, however, Eisenhower committed economic and military aid, along with America's international prestige, to Diem's shaky political fortunes. The decision of how far the United States might actually go in order to fulfill Eisenhower's commitment to South Vietnam would fall to his successors in the White House.

Affluence: A “People of Plenty”

President Eisenhower’s “farewell address” of 1961 famously criticized the increasingly cozy relationship between the groups that directed nation's foreign policy and its economic system. The former general warned that a “military-industrial complex” threatened to so accelerate the costs of Cold War containment that the burden of military expenditures would eventually harm the U.S. domestic economy.

Eisenhower’s warning contained several ironies. Most obviously, his administration, while trying to contain costs, had watched ever-larger sums of money flow to the national security establishment. Eisenhower's selection of Charles Wilson of General Motors in 1953 and Neil McElroy of Procter & Gamble in 1957 to head the Department of Defense, moreover, seemingly dramatized the same linkage Ike decried in his final address. Government spending on national security—what critics called “military Keynesianism” (see chapter 27)—pumped money into the general economy and stimulated key industries.

In addition, Eisenhower's warnings about possible dangers came after eight years during which his White House had praised the nation's continued economic growth. In 1945, the United States had still teetered on the brink of economic depression. By 1960, it could claim a GNP more than five times that of Great Britain and at least ten times that of Japan. The output of major U.S. corporations, such as General Motors, surpassed the GNP of many sovereign nations.

Economic Growth

The 1950s marked the midpoint of a period of generally steady economic growth that began during the Second World War and continued until the early 1970s. Writing in the mid-1950s, the historian David Potter called Americans a “people of plenty.” Corporations turned out vast quantities of consumer goods and enjoyed rising profits. Investments and business ventures overseas boosted corporate profits at home. The domestic economy intersected with an international marketplace dominated by U.S.-based firms. The label “Made in America” announced both the quality of particular products and the economic power of the nation at large. A global national-security policy, in addition to making the Pentagon one of the nation's largest consumers, helped keep raw materials and energy flowing from the
Third World. Abundant supplies of inexpensive oil and natural gas, in particular, lowered production costs and allowed U.S. industries to substitute less costly, and less polluting, foreign energy sources for domestically mined coal.

Newer U.S. industries, such as chemicals and electronics, quickly came to dominate the world marketplace. The Corning Glass Company reported that most of its sales during the mid-1950s came from products that had not even been on the market in 1940. General Electric proudly proclaimed that “progress is our most important product.”

The newest suburbs—and the products their residents consumed—remained prominent emblems of this particular view of progress. Because these outlying areas lacked, at best, adequate mass transit, life revolved around the automobile. Initially, if the male breadwinner required the family car to commute to work, his spouse needed to spend her day near home. As the opportunities for buying automobiles on credit expanded during the mid-1950s, however, the two-car family and the new suburban shopping malls, surrounded by acres of free parking, became tangible symbols of economic growth. Widespread ownership of kitchen appliances, television sets, and automobiles marked those living in the United States, especially in the eyes of most of those in the rest of the world, as people of plenty.

Words such as plenty, abundance, and affluence fit nicely with the dominant economic vision. The rate of growth and the burgeoning supply of consumer goods overshadowed all other economic indicators. Mainstream political discourse increasingly slid by what people actually owned—their accumulated wealth—to focus on their affluence—what they could, with the aid of generous credit terms, consume. From this perspective, observers could easily see the entire American Way of Life constantly improving. Some even predicted a leveling out of living standards between the top and the bottom levels of this growth-enabled consumer society. Any remaining gulf seemed not between people with cars and those without them, they announced, but between ones who drove Cadillacs and Lincolns and those who piloted Chevrolets and Fords. “Luxury has reached the masses,” proclaimed Fortune.

Many economists claimed that greater government expenditures would generate even faster growth, but the Eisenhower administration demurred. Fearing that increased spending might fuel an inflationary spiral of rising prices and destabilize the economy, it kept expenditures for nonmilitary programs under tight control and remained committed, at least rhetorically, to restraining even the Pentagon’s spending habits. As a result, by the late 1950s, the federal government began running balanced budgets.
Highways and Waterways

The Eisenhower administration, after due deliberation, did endorse several costly new domestic programs. For one of these, the construction of an interstate highway system, it could invoke national-security considerations. Supposedly, during any military emergency, the government could rush supplies and personnel along federally financed superhighways. Creating a national tax on gasoline and other transportation-related products, the Highway Act of 1956 authorized a national system of limited-access expressways. Touted as the largest public works project in world history, this program delighted the oil, concrete, and tire industries; provided steady work for construction firms and labor unions; and boosted the interstate trucking business. It also confirmed the victory of the automobile over competing modes of surface travel, including passenger trains, trolleys, and buses.

The White House also supported expensive water-diversion projects in the West. The Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation—federal agencies with powerful supporters in business and Congress—spent billions of dollars on dams, irrigation canals, and reservoirs. Irrigation turned desert into crop land, and elaborate pumping systems even allowed rivers to flow uphill. No society in the history of the world had ever devoted a similar portion of its resources to water projects. By 1960, much of the arid West enjoyed reliable access to trillions of gallons of water. Governmental expenditures laid the basis for new economic growth in states such as Texas, California, and Arizona.

These water projects came at a price. Technologically complicated and costly, they apparently needed similarly complex and expensive bureaucracies to sustain them. As a consequence, local communities lost power to governmental agencies and to the large-scale private entrepreneurs who pushed aside smaller farmers and ranchers. In addition, several American Indian tribes found significant portions of their land being flooded for large water reservoirs or being purchased by agribusinesses or large ranching interests. Moreover, these vast projects—which diverted surface waters, tapped into ground-water tables, and dotted the West with dams and reservoirs—also produced ecological problems. They disrupted and degraded critical habitats and contributed to the buildup of salt by-products in the water and the soil. Some scientists also began to warn about the consequences to animal and plant life from the overuse, especially by larger farming operations, of pesticides such as DDT.

Labor–Management Accord

Most corporate leaders, supportive of the kind of government involvement required to build the Interstate Highway System highways and water projects, were learning to live with labor unions as well. The auto industry, where management and labor leaders had negotiated a mutually acceptable contract in 1950, showcased what some economic observers saw as a tacit accord between the two sides.

At the end of the Second World War, more than 14 million U.S. workers, roughly 35 percent of those who worked in nonagricultural jobs, held union cards. Hoping to consolidate this base and to move forward cautiously, most union leaders saw closer cooperation with corporate management, rather than aggressive new
organizing drives, as the safest way to guarantee employment stability and secure political influence for their unions.

The United Auto Workers (UAW), which had been one of the most militant Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions during the 1930s, helped lead the way. Unions such as the UAW dropped demands for greater involvement in “management prerogatives.” These included organization of the daily work routine, introduction of new technologies, investment priorities, and, most important, decisions on where to locate new facilities. Unions continued to bargain aggressively but on a relatively narrow range of issues that immediately affected worker paychecks and benefits. Union leaders also assured management that rank-and-file workers would abide by their union contracts and disavow the wildcat tactics that had been used during the 1930s and 1940s. In another sign of declining militancy within the labor movement, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the CIO, long at odds, merged in 1955. Finally, to police this new labor–management détente in an even-handed manner, both sides looked to the federal government’s National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The 1950s thus seemed to signal an end to the kind of fierce labor–capital conflicts that had marked the 1930s and had continued through the 1940s.

Some union activists, however, expressed concern about the new direction of the labor movement. Although membership rolls stood at record highs, nearly two-thirds of all unionized workers lived in only 10 states. Worse, there were already clear signs in some areas of union strength, such as the Northeastern United States, of companies beginning to move jobs elsewhere, beginning with states in the South. There, the union movement lacked strong roots, and the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 allowed for state laws that frustrated new organizing drives, such as the ultimately underproductive effort known as “Operation Dixie.”

Most business leaders, on the other hand, judged the new direction in labor–management relations as a substantial victory for their side. Fortune magazine noted that General Motors, while paying higher wages and shouldering costlier employee benefit packages, “got a bargain” on the larger issue of labor peace from its landmark 1950 contract with the UAW. To safeguard their control over decision making, corporations expanded their supervisory staffs, a practice that drove up consumer prices and curtailed worker participation in planning the work process. The labor–management accord also helped divide industrial workers from one another: Those employed in the most profitable sectors of the economy, such as the auto industry, could bargain far more effectively than those who worked in less lucrative sectors.

To further consolidate management’s power, many businesses expanded benefits for their workers. Companies such as Sears and Eastman Kodak encouraged a cooperative corporate culture, which included health and pension plans, profit-sharing arrangements, and social programs. Some even created private recreational parks for the exclusive use of their employees. Reaching out to workers, executives decided, would reduce the appeal of both aggressive unions and more extensive governmental welfare measures.

Between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s, a large percentage of U.S. wage-earners came to enjoy at least some of the fruits of affluence. Real wages (what workers make after adjusting their paychecks for inflation) rose steadily, while job openings remained plentiful. The frequency of industrial accidents dropped; fringe benefits (what workers receive in the form of health insurance, paid vacation time, and retirement plans) invariably improved; and job security was generally high.

Political Pluralism

Economic growth also appeared to help sustain a stable political system. Observers of the domestic scene during the 1950s could not help but see their own times in terms of memories of the past and visions of the future. In contrast to the conflicts of the 1930s, the disruptions during the Second World War, and the Great Fear of the early Cold War period, the 1950s seemed an era of relative tranquility. Moreover, domestic life in the United States seemed less troubled and chaotic than that in other parts of the Cold War world, as the increasingly prosperous nation worked, fairly effectively, to mute conflict and solve domestic problems.

According to the dominant viewpoint, which political scientists called “pluralism” (or “interest-group pluralism”), U.S. politics featured a roughly equal bargaining process among well-organized interest groups. John Kenneth Galbraith, for example, coined the term “countervailing power” to describe the ability of labor unions, consumer lobbies, farm organizations, and other groups to check the appetites of giant corporations. No single group could hope to dictate to the others, celebrants of pluralism claimed, because so many interests felt securely empowered. Pluralists shrugged off signs of an apparent decline in political participation, clearly evident in how few citizens went to the polls on election days, by arguing that relatively low voter turnouts simply showed widespread satisfaction with how well existing processes worked.

In addition to praising the process, pluralists invariably praised the results. Public leaders, it seemed, could find a realistic solution to virtually every political problem. Short-term conflicts over specific issues might never
disappear, but supporters of the pluralist vision pointed out how affluence could moderate political passions and point warring interests toward a viable long-term agreement on fundamental arrangements. As a professor at Harvard Law School put it, constant economic growth meant that “in any conflict of interest,” it was “always possible to work out a solution” because continuing affluence appeared to guarantee that any settlement would leave all interests “better off than before.”

A Religious People

The celebration of political pluralism accompanied the exaltation of the stabilizing role of religion. Signs of religious commitment seemed part of most people’s weekly, sometimes daily, routine. Formal church membership grew at more than double the rate of the U.S. population during the 1950s. Moreover, public life appeared solidly anchored in religious values. As part of the crusade against “atheistic communism,” Congress emphasized the role of religion by constructing a nondenominational prayer room on Capitol Hill, adding the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance, and declaring the phrase “In God We Trust,” emblazoned on U.S. currency for nearly a century, to be the official national motto.

At the same time, observers claimed that intense religious allegiances no longer divided people as much as they had in the past. President Eisenhower urged people to practice their own religious creed, whatever it might be. “Our government makes no sense,” he declared, “unless it is founded in a deep and religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.” Tommy Sands, a young pop singer, advised his teenage fans that “all religions are the greatest.”

Prominent religious leaders noted how a widespread “faith in faith” could bring people together. Rabbi Morris Kretzer, head of the Jewish Chaplain’s Organization, reassured Protestants and Catholics that they and their Jewish neighbors shared “the same rich heritage of the Old Testament . . . the sanctity of the Ten Commandments, the wisdom of the prophets, and the brotherhood of man.” A 1954 survey claimed that more than 95 percent of the population identified with one of the three major faiths, and religious commentators talked about the unifying power of a “Judeo-Christian tradition.” The era’s leading study of religion, Will Herberg’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew (1955), argued that these three major faiths were really “saying the same thing in affirming the ‘spiritual ideals’ and ‘moral values’ of the American Way of Life.”

The media elevated several religious leaders to celebrity status. Norman Vincent Peale, a Protestant minister who linked an embrace of religiosity to the achievement of individual peace of mind, sold millions of books containing the message that belief in a Higher Power could bring “health, happiness, and goodness” to daily life. Some close students of religion, such as Herberg, found Peale’s most famous book, The Power of Positive Thinking (1952) to be a lightweight version of religious theology, but it remained a best seller throughout the 1950s. The Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen hosted an Emmy-winning, prime-time television program called Life Is Worth Living, which continues to play in reruns on cable TV. The Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, a friend of Sheen’s and eventually a confidant of President Eisenhower, achieved super-star status during the 1950s. The best-selling Peace with God (1953) offered the same message Graham preached to large crowds and over television: Only a spiritual rebirth, through a direct commitment to Jesus Christ, would bring salvation to individuals who lived in a world filled with so many signs of sin and corruption.

Although observers generally identified Peale, Sheen, and Graham with relatively conservative, anticommunist political causes, their differing approaches to religion shared a broadly pluralist stance. Billy Graham, for instance, scrupulously avoided the kind of anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic rhetoric that sometimes accompanied the sermons of other protestant evangelists, and his own ministry abandoned all forms of racial segregation during the mid-1950s.

Moreover, appeals to religious faith could be found all across the political spectrum. Dorothy Day, who had been involved in religiously based community activism since the early 1930s, continued to work with an interdenominational coalition of communitarians. Especially through the pages of her Catholic Worker magazine, she promoted programs for redistributing income and wealth in more equitable ways and for securing a more peaceful world. Church leaders and laypeople from all three major denominations supported efforts at addressing racial and religious discrimination, including the spiritually grounded efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders (see following discussion).

Discontents of Affluence

Celebrations of economic affluence, political pluralism, and religious commitment existed alongside a relatively vibrant body of social criticism. The widespread faith that the United States could deploy its abundant economic and political-social resources to solve virtually all of its remaining problems likely helped encourage this rich critical culture. The 1950s produced a sizeable and diverse body of literature that probed issues such as social conformity, unruly youth, mass culture, discrimination, and economic inequality.
Conformity in an Affluent Society

The sociologist William H. Whyte, Jr., gained a wide academic audience for *The Organization Man* (1956). This book indicted corporate culture for contributing to an unwanted by-product of affluence: social conformity. Criticizing the social, cultural, and psychological (although not the economic) role of large corporations, *The Organization Man* saw ordinary corporate employees deferring to the wishes and values of their bosses at the expense of their own individuality. Even among younger executives, Whyte’s book claimed, the security of knowing what the corporate hierarchy desired—and when it wanted it—outweighed any concern about losing track of one’s own sense of self.

*The Lonely Crowd* (1950) by another sociologist, David Riesman, offered an even broader critique of social conformity. This influential book claimed to see a shift from an “inner-directed” culture, in which people looked to themselves and to their immediate families for their sense of identity and self-worth, to an “other-directed” one, in which people constantly gazed at others for approval and measured their own worth against mass-mediated images. An other-directed society, in short, emphasized “adjustment” to the expectations of others rather than commitment to individual “autonomy.”

Seeking to show how baby boomers would supposedly learn conformist values, *The Lonely Crowd* pointed to *Tootle, the Engine*, a popular children’s book. After “Tootle” shows a preference for jumping the rails and frolicking in the nearby fields, people from his community use peer pressure to nudge him “back on the tracks.” If he remains on the straight-and-narrow and follows lines laid down by others, Tootle learns, his future as a powerful and fast-moving streamliner will be assured. Riesman’s book argued that this “modern cautionary tale,” which stressed the importance of adjusting one’s own path through life to the expectations of others, contrasted vividly with the self-reliant values served up in *Little Red Riding Hood* and other earlier conflict-filled fairy tales.

The critique of social conformity reached perhaps its widest audience through the best-selling books of journalist Vance Packard. *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) argued that the advertising industry—especially through calculated appeals to the insecurities of consumers—encouraged conformist behavior, particularly in buying habits and cultural tastes. His book, Packard claimed, could help its readers “achieve a creative life in these conforming times,” when so many people “are left only with the roles of being consumers or spectators.”

If analysts looked hard enough, it seemed, evidence of conformity and loss of selfhood lurked nearly everywhere. Critics such as Whyte, Riesman, and Packard generally highlighted signs supposedly evident among middle-class men, but writers such as Betty Friedan warned about an analogous, although gendered, trend among many women, especially those with good educations and lively intellects who found themselves trapped in the new suburbia. Business corporations, for instance, expected that the wives of their male executives would help their husbands deal with the demands of corporate life, including the need for frequent dinner parties and occasional relocation moves. The organization man, it was said, should recognize that his ascent up the economic ladder could depend on how well an “organization woman,” his spouse, conformed to her unpaid work for the greater good of the corporate world.

The affluent cultural climate of the 1950s, then, hardly discouraged social criticism, some of it occasionally quite pointed. Both the scholarly and more popular writings of the sociologist C. Wright Mills, for instance, denounced how corporate leaders and advertising executives operated as members of a “power elite.” A relatively small coalition of the already powerful could set the agenda for public
policy discussions, especially those involving national security and domestic spending priorities. This ruling elite, which also included military leaders and anticommunist politicians, shaped the crucial decisions on important policy issues. Moreover, its emphasis on generating sustained economic growth produced social problems that went far beyond the other-directedness analyzed in The Lonely Crowd. The much-vaunted American Way of Life, in Mills’ view, featured increasingly regimented work routines and meaningless leisure-time activities that could never produce a true sense of satisfaction. Standing against the tide of pluralist accounts, Mills watched his claims undergo constant sifting and resifting. The numerous academics and journalists who espoused the pluralist faith during the 1950s invariably concluded that Mills, for all his passion and commitment, offered only simplistic “conspiracy theories.” During the 1960s, however, his ideas about a “power elite” and a widespread sense of social “alienation” would circulate within a much more receptive cultural environment.

Restive Youth

Meanwhile, concern about young people, especially their cultural tastes and social behavior, intensified. At one point, in the mid-1950s, many criminologists linked a rise in the sale of comic books to a spike in reported rates of juvenile delinquency. The Seduction of the Innocent (1954), a popular study by the psychologist Frederick Wertham, blamed comics, especially those featuring images of sex and violence, for “mass-conditioning” children and for stimulating social unrest. Responding to regulatory legislation by some U.S. cities and to calls for additional measures by Congress, the comic book industry quickly embraced self-censorship. Publishers who adhered to new, industry-developed guidelines for portraying violence and deviant behavior began to display a seal of approval on their publications. The “great comic book scare” proved a relatively momentary fright.

Other worrisome signs, however, persisted. One of these, a former truck driver named Elvis Presley, rocked the pop music scene with several hits on the tiny Sun record label. Most of the major record distributors dismissed rock as a passing fad, but Sun’s Sam Phillips detected something more substantial. As soon as Elvis began to make personal appearances, the overt sensuality that dominated his musical performance quickly validated Phillips’ intuitions. Presley and other youthful (invariably male) rock stars—including Buddy Holly from West Texas, Richard Valenzuela (Richie Valens) from East Los Angeles, Frankie Lymon from Spanish Harlem, and “Little Richard” Penniman from Georgia—leaped over cultural and ethnic barriers. Rock derived new musical forms from older sources, especially African American rhythm and blues (R&B) and the “hillbilly” music of southern whites.

The first rock ‘n’ rollers seemingly spoke to the hopes and fears of millions of their youthful fans. They sang about the joy of “having a ball tonight,” the pain of the “summertime blues,” the torment of being “a teenager in love,” and the promise of deliverance, through the power of rock, from “the days of old.” Songs such as “Roll Over Beethoven” by Chuck Berry became powerful teen anthems.

Guardians of older, family-oriented forms of commercial culture found rock ‘n’ roll far more frightening than comic books. They denounced rock’s sparse lyrics, pulsating guitars, and screeching saxophones as an assault on the very idea of music. Even the name of this music, it seemed obvious, played to raging teenage hormones. Religious groups thus denounced rock as the “Devil’s music”; anticommunists detected a clever strategy by the Red Menace to corrupt youth; and segregationists saw its indebtedness to black musical forms as part of a sinister

[Image of Elvis Presley]
plot to encourage “race-mixing.” Still a bellwether of conservative tastes, the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover saw rock music as “repulsive to right-thinking people” and as a social force that would soon have “serious effects on our young people.” The danger of rock ‘n’ roll seemed abundantly evident in The Blackboard Jungle (1955), a hit movie (which featured “Rock Around the Clock” on its soundtrack) about a racially mixed group of sexually active students who, for good measure, terrorize teachers and mock any adult authority not “manly enough” to set limits on their excesses.

Eventually attentive to new turns in the product-centered culture of youth, the commercial entertainment industry soon recognized the potential breadth of rock ‘n’ roll’s appeal. Its flexible cultural and musical vocabulary could attract its youthful audience with both critiques and celebrations of the consequences of material abundance. “Charlie Brown,” for example, satirically contrasted pieties about staying in school with the bleak educational opportunities open to many students, especially those of African descent. Chuck Berry sang of a terminally bored teenager, riding around in his automobile, “with no particular place to go.” The implied social criticism in songs such as these, which older listeners often failed to decode, anticipated the more overtly rebellious rock music of the 1960s.

At the same time, rock music and the larger youth culture of the 1950s could also merge seamlessly into that era’s mass-consumption ethic. Sam Phillips, lacking the capital to distribute records to a rapidly expanding market, sold Presley’s contract to RCA and watched the rest of his budding stars drift away from Sun to larger labels. The leading record companies and Top-40 radio stations saw middle-class teenagers, whose average weekly income/allowance reached $10 by 1958, as a market segment well worth targeting. In “Sweet Little Sixteen,” Berry sang about an affluent teenager chasing after the latest fashions, the next rock ‘n’ roll show, and “about half-a million framed autographs.” Record companies and disc jockeys began promoting a second generation of rock performers, such as the Beach Boys, and songs that exalted the pursuit of “fun, fun, fun,” which apparently required the latest clothing fashions, late-model automobiles, and the top-selling rock ‘n’ roll records.

The Mass Culture Debate

Meanwhile, concern about social conformity and youth-oriented styles often joined a broader cultural debate over “mass culture.” Much of the anxiety about the decline of individualism and the rise of disruptive young people encompassed deeper fears, especially among people who equated their own tastes with the future of civilization. From their perspective, the marketers who could apparently use standardized imagery to manipulate the cultural marketplace and sway the emotions of millions of people, those “hidden persuaders,” also threatened to debase the fragile core of cultural life.

Cosmopolitan critics, connoisseurs of European-derived culture, decried the mass-marketed products flooding the newly affluent United States. They worried that the “bad”—such as comics and rock music—would soon purge anything “good” from the cultural marketplace and perhaps prevent future generations from even being able to distinguish between them. Moreover, they warned that a national mass media, by addressing millions of cultural consumers in the same manner, would obscure meaningful, and sometimes subtle, differences underneath a constant blur of pleasant, superficial imagery. After intensively studying a small town in upstate New York, for example, a team of sociologists claimed that mass-mediated images from outside this community seemed “so overwhelming that little scope is left for the expression of local cultural forms.”

Television, dominated by three large corporations (NBC, CBS, and ABC) and ultimately financed by revenues from national advertising accounts, provided a prominent target in the mass culture debate. Picturing millions of seemingly passive viewers gathered around “the boob tube,” critics decried both the quality of television programming and its presumed impact on viewers. Network television, according to its critics, encouraged people to retreat into unreal, fabricated spaces, such as a mythical Old West or the fake competition on TV quiz shows. By the late 1950s, the television networks filled many of their prime-time hours with western-themed series (such as Gunsmoke) and quiz programs (such as the 64,000 Question), whose contestants had been supplied the answers they pretended to puzzle over. The head of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) would later speak for the 1950s generation of TV critics when he denounced the entire medium as a “vast wasteland.”

Social observers also noted how television even appeared to be recutting the fabric of everyday life. Architects rearranged living space within middle-class homes so that the TV set, serving as an electronic substitute for the traditional fireplace hearth, could become the focal point of family gatherings. New products—such as the frozen TV dinner, the TV tray, the recliner chair, and the influential magazine TV Guide—became extensions of a television-constructed culture.

The mass-produced cultural products that critics decried, however, also seemed inseparable from the pluralistic political system and the economic growth that these same observers generally celebrated. Was it possible to eliminate the curse of mass culture without sacrificing
liberty and affluence? If, for example, Congress were to legislate against “dangerous” cultural products, might not such regulations shrink the boundaries for all legally protected expression? If local communities were to step in, as some had done with comics, the results might be even worse. The prospect of southern segregationists confiscating civil-rights literature or of local censorship boards rushing, unimpeded, to ban books by celebrated authors such as D. H. Lawrence hardly appealed to the cosmopolitan, well-educated critics of mass culture. Their critical diagnosis, in short, seemed short on viable remedies. Most important, the mass culture debate did nothing to halt the flood of products, especially TV programs, aimed at an ever-expanding audience.

Changing Gender Politics

Meanwhile, the 1950s saw the continuation of significant changes in how and where people lived and worked. This era particularly challenged ideas about the nature of gender relationships.

The New Suburbs and Gender Ideals

In middle-class homes, especially those located in the new suburbs, wives and mothers discovered just how “liberating” consumer technology might be. Colorful and chrome-plated appliances and “modern conveniences”—such as automatic clothes washers, more powerful vacuum cleaners, and home freezers—did ease old burdens but also created new ones. Clothes and floors now, according to advertisers, needed to be kept “spotlessly clean.” Elaborate meals could be prepared in “a jiffy.” Careful academic studies found that, contrary to what promoters of labor-saving devices promised, women could devote as much of their day to household tasks during the 1950s as had their grandmothers in the early 1900s. New household technologies did not so much reduce the time that women spent on domestic duties as shift it to different activities, ones requiring the household gadgets that accompanied the spread of affluence.

At first glance, the changing demands of housework fit into a broader pattern of “separate spheres.” A set of clearly delineated and gendered barriers seemed to structure daily life, particularly in the newer suburbs. At its most rigid, the suburban lifestyle included a public sphere of work and politics dominated by men and a private sphere of housework and child care reserved for women. Because few businesses located in the suburbs, men began spending a good portion of their days commuting from home to work. Women who wanted to hold a job outside their homes initially found nearby employment opportunities about as scarce as child-care facilities. Consequently, mothers spent a great deal of time taking care of their baby-boomer children. In contrast to the urban neighborhoods or the rural communities in which many suburban housewives had grown up, the new suburbs of the 1950s contained few older relatives or younger single women who could assist with household and child-care duties.

Without mothers or grandmothers living close by, young suburban mothers turned elsewhere for child-rearing advice. Local Parents and Teachers Associations (PTAs), connected to neighborhood schools, offered the chance for women to exchange information with their neighbors, as did women’s organizations such as the La Leche League. Increasingly, though, younger parents turned to an easily expandable shelf of child-care manuals. Dr. Benjamin Spock’s Baby and Child Care, first published in 1946 with successive editions selling in the tens of millions, stood out from its competitors.

Following earlier advice books, Spock’s book assigned virtually all child-care duties to women and underscored their nurturing role by stressing the need to constantly monitor a child’s psychological growth. The future of the family—and the nation itself, Spock implied—depended on how well baby-boom-era mothers handled the daily responsibility of child-rearing. Other manuals picked up where Dr. Spock left off and counseled mothers on the care and feeding of teenagers.

The alarmist tone of many of these advice books reflected and helped generate a growing concern about teenage culture. A problem teen, according to one 1950s study, sprang from a “family atmosphere not conducive to development of emotionally well-integrated, happy youngsters, conditioned to obey legitimate authority.” The ideal mother, from this perspective, did not work outside her home and devoted herself to rearing her own particular segment of the baby-boom generation. Women who desired careers outside of their home and marriage risked being labeled, in line with widespread psychological theories of the day, as maladjusted and deviant, real-life versions of the femmes fatales who populated films noirs (see chapter 27).

Slightly different versions of this message appeared nearly everywhere. Even the nation’s most prestigious colleges for women assumed that their female students would pursue men and marriage instead of a career. In a 1955 commencement address at the prestigious, all-women Smith College, Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic Party’s urbane presidential contender, reminded graduates that it was the duty of each to keep her husband “truly purposeful, to keep him whole.” Popular magazines, psychology literature, and pop-culture imagery suggested that understanding, supportive wives and mothers held the keys to
social stability. Conversely, women who desired alternative arrangements, either in their work or their sexual preferences, needed to be pressured, much as “Tootle, the Engine,” to return to the straight and narrow path.

Competing portraits, however, painted different and more complicated pictures of gender arrangements. Most men told researchers that they preferred an active partner to a “submissive, stay-at-home” wife. Popular TV shows, such as “Father Knows Best” and “Leave It to Beaver,” subtly suggested that middle-class fathers should become more engaged in family life than they normally seemed to be. Advice manuals still envisioned husbands earning their family’s entire income but increasingly urged them to be “real fathers” at home. Parenting literature came to extol an ethic of “family togetherness,” and institutions such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) began to offer courses on how to achieve this ideal.

The call for family togetherness seemed to be, in part at least, a response to what cultural historians have come to see as an incipient “male revolt” against “family values” and the “male breadwinner role.” Hugh Hefner’s Playboy magazine, which debuted in 1953, epitomized this rebellion. It ridiculed men who neglected their own happiness in order to support a wife and children as suckers rather than saints. Playboy’s first issue defiantly proclaimed: “We aren’t a ‘family magazine.’” Hefner advised women to pass Playboy “along to the man in your life and get back to your Ladies Home Companion.” In this version of the good life, a man lived in his own “pad” rather than in the heavily mortgaged family home; drove a sports car rather than a four-door sedan or a station wagon; and courted the Playmate of the Month rather than the Mother of the Year.

Signs of Women’s Changing Roles

Despite media images of homebound wives and mothers, greater numbers of women than ever before now worked outside of their homes. The rate of female employment, including that among married women, had begun to rise during the 1940s, and this trend continued throughout the 1950s. Women who were married often entered the labor force as part-time workers in the expanding clerical and service sectors. In 1948, about 25 percent of married mothers held jobs outside of the home; at the end of the 1950s, nearly 40 percent did. With the introduction of a new method of oral contraception in 1960, the birth control pill, women gained an additional measure of control over family planning and career decisions—and over decisions about their own sexual behavior. By 1964, one-quarter of the women who used contraception relied on “the pill.” At the same time, women’s groups began to press for an end to antiabortion laws that restricted the ability of women, particularly those without the means to travel overseas or to states that offered relatively liberal access to medical abortions, to find legal and relatively safe ways to terminate pregnancies.

Employment opportunities for women, especially when compared to those available to most men of European descent, still remained limited during the 1950s. Virtually all of the nation’s nurses, telephone operators, secretaries, and elementary school teachers were women. Historically, pay scales in these areas lagged behind those for men in comparable fields; union jobs remained rare; and chances for rapid, or significant, advancement seemed elusive. As the number of low-paid jobs for women expanded during the 1950s, better-paid professional opportunities actually narrowed. Medical and law schools, along with most professional societies, admitted very few women. When Sandra Day (who would later become Justice Sandra Day O’Connor serving on the U.S. Supreme Court) graduated, with honors, from a prestigious law school during the 1950s, not a single private firm offered her a job, and she worked, without pay, in the public sector. The number of women on college and university faculties shrank during the 1950s, down from the already low levels of earlier decades.

The “family wage,” as both ideal and practice, created a barrier to better-paying jobs for women. Employers still invoked the notion of a family wage to justify paying male workers higher wages and salaries than their female counterparts, even though significant numbers of women now needed to support not just themselves but also a family on their own paychecks. This was especially the case for women of color. By 1960, women headed slightly more than 20 percent of black families. Recognizing that idealized images of motherhood hardly characterized the lives of the many African American women who worked outside of their homes, Ebony magazine regularly celebrated black women who combined success in parenting and at work. It featured articles about educators and prominent entertainers, as well as about blue-collar workers, such as the only African American woman who worked as a mechanic at American Airlines.

Some of the mass-circulation magazines that targeted women of European descent also carried a relatively wide array of messages about gender roles. Although many social commentators continued to label a woman’s desire to pursue activities outside of her home as “unnatural,” popular publications increasingly featured stories about women successfully pursuing careers in public life and in business. The 1950s, in short, saw growing diversity in both the social roles that women were assuming and the ways in which commercial mass culture represented aspirations for further change.
The Fight against Discrimination, 1953–1960

**Focus Question**

How did the fight against discrimination raise new political issues and visions during the 1950s and early 1960s? How did the nation’s political and social institutions respond to these issues?

When Dwight Eisenhower assumed the presidency in 1953, the U.S. Supreme Court was preparing to rehear a full-scale constitutional challenge to racially segregated educational systems. The NAACP and its chief legal strategist, Thurgood Marshall, spearheaded the attack on Jim Crow school arrangements. Before the rehearing took place, a vacancy in the Chief Justiceship allowed Ike to tap Earl Warren, a former Republican governor of California, to head the High Court. The Supreme Court, with Warren as its “Chief,” entered the widening struggle against discrimination.

### The Brown Cases, 1954–1955

The landmark Supreme Court case popularly known as “the Brown decision” actually included a series of constitutional challenges to school segregation. In 1954, Chief Justice Warren wrote a unanimous opinion (in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*) striking down state-mandated segregation of public schools. This practice, according to Warren’s relatively brief and broadly argued opinion, violated the constitutional right of African American students to equal protection of the law. A companion case, decided the same day (*Bolling v. Sharpe*), ruled against segregated schools in the District of Columbia. Although these decisions technically applied only to state-operated schools, they suggested that other segregated public facilities now lay open to constitutional challenge. In 1955, however, yet another Supreme Court decision, known as *Brown II*, decreed that the process of public school desegregation should not go into effect immediately; it could, instead, move forward “with all deliberate speed.”

Carrying out the broader implications of the Brown cases challenged the nation’s political, social, and cultural institutions. A crucial part of the crusade against racial discrimination had long focused on the 16 states that the Census Bureau officially called “the South,” but ongoing demographic changes ensured that the civil-rights struggle would not remain a regional matter.

During the 1950s, life in the South continued to become more like that in the rest of the country. New cultural forces, such as network television, penetrated this once relatively insular region, opening parts of it to ideas and practices that challenged the prevailing racial patterns. Machine technologies continued to displace the South’s predominantly black field workers, and the absence of strong labor unions and the presence of favorable tax laws attracted more national chain stores and northern-based businesses. In addition, an improved generation of air-conditioning units, for businesses and homes, helped transform work, leisure, and demographic patterns throughout the southern United States.

At the same time, the racial and ethnic composition of cities in the West, Midwest, and Northeast changed to look more like that in areas of the South. In 1940, more than three-quarters of the nation’s African Americans lived in the South. Following earlier trends, African Americans continued to leave the rural South and become important political constituencies in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Cleveland, and other urban areas. In these locales, most Democrats and many Republicans generally supported efforts to end racial discrimination. As more African Americans came to cast Democratic ballots, however, the GOP sought to refocus its appeal, reaching out to white voters in what had long
been the Democratic Party’s solid South and in the new suburban neighborhoods, especially in the Mid and Far West. At the same time, the nation’s Spanish-speaking population continued to grow and to become an increasingly important political force, particularly in the West and Southwest.

The most familiar stories about the civil-rights crusade during the 1950s have long concentrated on the South, but recent histories help underscore its nationwide scope. By 1963, efforts to change the entire spectrum of racially based patterns and practices affected local, state, and national politics. Civil rights activists outside the South, where people of African and Latin American descent already exercised some measure of political leverage, worked for better jobs, improved housing, stronger neighborhood institutions, and greater influence within the larger political system. Cultivating ties to sympathetic politicians and labor unions, a relatively broad movement to end segregation and racial discrimination emerged, especially among African Americans, in virtually every northern and western city.

These urban-based movements employed a variety of tactics on behalf of several different goals. They pressed “shop where you can work” campaigns, which urged African American consumers to patronize only businesses that would employ them as workers. They tried to bring more blacks into the labor union movement and the fast-growing public service sector, so that they could find jobs in police and fire departments as well as in all of the various agencies of state and local government. Leading attorneys, while still supporting lawsuits such as Brown, joined with black lawyers to concentrate on the ordinary day-to-day legal problems of clients in their own communities. Increasingly, though, gaining additional political leverage seemed crucial to making gains in other areas, including economic ones.

Map 28.2  Shifts in African American Population Patterns, 1940–1960

During and after the Second World War, large numbers of African Americans left the rural South and migrated to new locations. Which states had the largest percentage of outmigration? Which saw the greatest percentage of population increase? How might this migration have affected American life?

View an animated version of this map or related maps at http://www.thomsonedu.com/history/murrin.
The search for political power became particularly contested and inexorably connected to the struggle to dismantle systems of officially sanctioned segregation throughout the South. Here, white segregationists pledged “massive resistance” to the *Brown* decisions. When the Supreme Court’s “all deliberate speed” approach in *Brown II* seemed to give them time to maneuver, their lawyers went to court in pursuit of traditional and newly invented delaying tactics. In 1956, 100 members of the U.S. Congress signed a “Southern Manifesto,” which condemned the Supreme Court’s desegregation rulings as a “clear abuse of judicial power” and pledged support for any state that intended “to resist forced integration by any lawful means.”

Defiance did not always remain within legal bounds, especially in the South. There, white vigilantes unfurled the banners and donned the robes of the Ku Klux Klan, and new racist organizations, such as the White Citizens Council, appeared on the scene. As a result, people who joined the civil-rights cause constantly risked injury and death. Even those who were only indirectly connected to the struggle could fall victim to racist violence. In August 1955, two white Mississippians brutally murdered 14-year-old Emmett Till, because they decided this black visitor from Chicago had acted “disrespectful” toward a married white woman.

Mamie Till Bradley insisted that her son’s death not remain a private incident. She demanded that his maimed corpse be displayed publicly for “the whole world to see” and insisted that his murderers be punished. To the surprise of many observers, Mississippi officials did indict two men for Till’s murder. When they came to trial, though, an all-white Mississippi jury quickly found the pair—who would subsequently confess their crime to a magazine reporter—not guilty.

### The Montgomery Bus Boycott and Martin Luther King, Jr.

In response to the uncertainty of judicial remedies, the southern civil-rights movement began supplementing legal maneuvering with ever-more ambitious and larger campaigns of direct action. Following an earlier 1953 campaign that secured partial desegregation of the public transportation system in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, activists in Montgomery, Alabama, raised their own sights. After police arrested *Rosa Parks* for defying a local segregation ordinance, Montgomery’s black community quickly mobilized and demanded a complete end to segregated buses. They coupled their demand with an ambitious boycott of city buses, which required organizing a system of private carpools as an alternative mode of transit. Joining with Rosa Parks, a longtime bastion of the local NAACP chapter, many other black women in Montgomery helped coordinate the complicated, months-long boycott. Responding to events in Montgomery, the U.S. Supreme Court extended the premise of the *Brown* decisions on education and specifically declared segregation of public buses to be unconstitutional.

After a campaign lasting more than a year, the effort succeeded. City officials, saddled with continued financial losses and legal defeat in court, agreed to end Montgomery’s separatist transit policy. Events in Montgomery suggested that other local black activists, even in the legally segregated

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**Montgomery Bus Boycott**

The drive to desegregate municipal buses in Montgomery, Alabama, required an elaborately organized and skillfully coordinated effort. It primarily relied on the talents and commitment of volunteers, particularly women. African American residents of Montgomery shared automobile transportation, coordinated by the boycott movement, while avoiding city buses, such as the one standing vacant across the street.

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South, could effectively mobilize—and then organize—community resources to fight against racial discrimination.

The Montgomery boycott of 1955–56 also vaulted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of its leaders and its primary spokesperson, into the national spotlight. Born, raised, and educated in Atlanta, Georgia, with a doctorate in theology from Boston University, King joined with other black ministers to follow up the victory in Montgomery by forming the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Increasingly able to mobilize against segregated public facilities and racial discrimination, the SCLC turned to the more difficult task of organizing an ongoing sociopolitical movement that could work for permanent change in other areas of race relations.

The relatively young male ministers in the SCLC tapped advice from across generational and gender divides. They turned, for example, to Bayard Rustin, who had been involved in civil-rights activism since the 1940s, and to Ella Baker, another veteran organizer with experience in CORE and the NAACP. Aided by Rustin’s tactical advice and Baker’s organizational skills, Dr. King thrived as the titular leader of the SCLC’s ambitious effort to register African American voters throughout the South.

King and his associates relied on nonviolent direct action. Following in the footsteps of Rustin and CORE (see chapter 27), they espoused a moral, religiously grounded ethic. The civil-rights crusade, in this sense, intended to be more than just another pluralist interest group that sought a place at the bargaining table. According to Dr. King’s well-publicized sermons and writings, nonviolent direct action would dramatize, through both word and deed, the evil of racial discrimination. The civil-rights crusade promised to bring “redemption and reconciliation” to the entire nation.

King’s powerful presence and religiously rooted rhetoric, which attracted all national media, played especially well on television. The people who directed this commercial medium began to recognize how news coverage, especially when focused on easily dramatized examples of conflict, could swell their audience and boost their journalistic stature. Media accounts of events in the South emphasized the roles played by King and his followers, helping to elevate their specific activities in the broader, constantly volatile drama of civil rights. The southern-based activists who looked to Dr. King, however, comprised only one part of a much broader, highly diverse movement that reached throughout the nation and into the world.

The Politics of Civil Rights: From the Local to the Global

All across the country, civil-rights activists pressed forward. Shortly after the conclusion of the Montgomery bus boycott, for example, New York City passed the nation’s first “open housing” ordinance, a model for other local and state measures intended to end racial discrimination in the sale and rental of homes and apartments. In other cities and states outside the South, civil-rights groups enjoyed considerable success in obtaining legislation to outlaw racial discrimination in hiring. The majority of people in a 1944 opinion poll had agreed that workers of European descent “should have the first chance” at any job opportunity, but subsequent surveys showed a steady erosion of this sentiment during the 1950s.

Efforts to obtain laws aimed at ending discrimination in housing, however, faced tougher going than those focused on the workplace. Typically, white homeowners in those urban and older suburban neighborhoods where African Americans or Latinos might hope to buy or rent tried to adopt the same exclusionary strategies used so effectively by their counterparts in the new suburbs.

In a number of instances, civil-rights groups continued to work, however, with sympathetic allies. In 1958, for example, a labor and civil-rights coalition in California, joining under slogans such as “Keep Mississippi Out of California” and “Fight Sharecropper Wages,” defeated an anti-union “right-to-work” proposal. Such a measure, its opponents claimed, threatened to drive down pay for workers, of both European and non-European descent, to levels found in the antiunion, pro-segregationist states of the Deep South. Buoyed by this success, the same coalition began aggressively lobbying members of the California legislature to enact a statewide opening housing measure.

Political institutions in Washington, D.C., also felt pressure to act on civil-rights matters. The Supreme Court lent its support at crucial times, such as the Montgomery bus boycott, but the Constitution did not grant the federal judiciary the power to provide the on-the-ground policing required to translate its definitions of liberty and equality into everyday practices. Congress, with the ability to enact enforcement legislation, remained deeply divided on racial issues. With southern segregationists, all members of the Democratic Party’s majority, holding key posts on Capitol Hill, antidiscrimination measures faced formidable congressional obstacles.

Even so, Congress did pass its first civil-rights measure in more than 80 years. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 established new procedures for expediting lawsuits by African Americans claiming illegal abridgement of their right, under the 15th Amendment, to vote. Generally credited to the tactical wizardry of Lyndon Johnson of Texas, the Democratic leader in the Senate, this legislation also created a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, a largely advisory body empowered only to study alleged violations and recommend additional remedies. In 1960, again after crucial maneuvering by Johnson, a second civil-rights act
expanded the legal remedies available to blacks who were being barred from voting in the South. These civil-rights measures, passed in the face of fierce opposition from southern Democrats, dramatized the difficulty of getting even relatively limited measures through Congress and clearing the obstacles segregationists could throw in the way of civil-rights legislation.

The office of the president, which theoretically possessed the constitutional power to enforce legislation and court orders, appeared reluctant, under Dwight Eisenhower, to take action. Lobbied by Republicans from the Northeast and West, Ike did support the Civil Rights Act of 1957 but held back when these same Republicans urged a dramatic presidential step, perhaps issuing an executive order barring racial discrimination on construction projects financed by federal funds. A confirmed gradualist, Eisenhower saw the fight against segregation as primarily a state and local matter, and he expressed doubts about political leaders in Washington being able to change the attitudes of people who were opposed to the integration of public facilities or job sites.

During the fall of 1957, however, events in Little Rock, Arkansas, finally forced Eisenhower’s hand. In response to a federal court order, which demanded desegregation of the city’s Central High, the state’s governor, Orval Faubus, had promised fellow segregationists that black students would never enter the school building. Ike’s initial temporizing allowed Faubus time to play to the white supremacist galleries of Arkansas, and the governor eventually deployed his state’s National Guard to prevent any move toward desegregation. Confronting this direct challenge to national authority, Eisenhower took command of the Arkansas National Guard and sent members of the U.S. Army to Little Rock. Black students, escorted by armed troops, finally entered Central High. The primary issue at stake, Eisenhower insisted, involved the defiance of the law of the land rather than the specific politics of school desegregation.

The confrontation in Little Rock also underscored, as the Eisenhower administration conceded, the international dimension of civil-rights politics in the United States. Washington often found itself on the defensive when foreign critics pointed to the U.S. record on civil rights. The Soviet Union delighted in reminding people around the world, particularly those in the Third World, how racial discrimination showed “the façade of the so-called ‘American democracy.’” Secretary of State Dulles warned that racial conflict at home was “not helpful to the influence of the United States abroad.” Events in Arkansas seemed to reaffirm the image, carried throughout the world by the Eisenhower administration’s informational campaign, of the United States as a powerful nation that supported liberty and equality. When the U.S. Supreme Court, in Cooper v. Aaron (1958), unanimously invalidated an Arkansas law intended to block further integrationist efforts, newspapers around the globe highlighted its action.

American Indian Policy

The Eisenhower administration also struggled with the politics of American Indian policy. It attempted to implement two programs, “termination” and “relocation,” that were already underway before it took office. The first, called for Washington to terminate the status of Indians as “wards of the United States” and grant them all the “rights and privileges pertaining to American citizenship.” This policy, to be pursued on a tribe-by-tribe basis, aimed at abolishing Indian reservations, liquidating tribal assets, and curtailing the social services offered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). In 1954, a year after Congress proposed this general approach, legislators enacted six specific bills of termination, which would change the legal status of more than 8,000 American Indians and affect the ownership of more than 1 million acres of tribal land.

Under the relocation program, which had begun in 1951, the government financed incentive packages intended to entice Indians to leave rural reservations and seek jobs in urban areas. In 1954, the BIA intensified its relocation efforts, with Minneapolis, St. Louis, Dallas, and several other cities joining Denver, Salt Lake City, and Los Angeles as relocation sites. Both relocation and termination rested on the assumption—widespread in the social-science literature of the day—that governmental planners could re-chart the lives of American Indians and that the nation’s social and cultural systems could quickly assimilate all Indian people into the mainstream of U.S. life.
The initiatives, however, faced fierce criticism. After
Congress enacted several more termination bills during
the 1950s, almost 12,000 people lost their status as tribal
members, and land formally held by tribes continued to
fall into the hands of commercial, non-Indian developers.
Indians from terminated tribes stood to forfeit both their
exemption from state taxation and the social services pro-
vided by the BIA. In return, they gained relatively little,
especially in economic benefits. Relocation went no better
than termination. Even as this process weakened the links
between migrants and communal life on the reservations
they left, most relocated Indians complained of finding
only low-paying, dead-end jobs and racial discrimination
away from their tribal homes.

American Indian activists and their supporters mobil-
lized against the termination and relocation policies. By
1957, their efforts forced the U.S. government to scale back
the initial congressional timetable, which had called for
liquidating every tribe within five years. Continued
protests led both Republicans and Democrats to repudiate
termination in their party platforms of 1960. Two years
later, Congress finally ended the program. Despite the cri-
icism it produced, the relocation program continued until
1967. By then, almost half of the nation’s Indians lived in
relocation cities. This policy, critics constantly noted, nei-
ther touched the deep-rooted problems that many Indians
confronted, including a life expectancy only two-thirds
that of whites, nor provided significantly better opportu-
nities for employment or education.

The Growth
of Spanish-Speaking Populations

Millions of Spanish-speaking people, many of whom had
recently arrived in the United States, also began mobiliz-
ing in hopes of realizing the nation’s commitments to
liberty and equality. Despite the prospect of discrimina-
tory practices in the U.S. job and housing markets, large
numbers of Puerto Ricans began moving from their
island commonwealth to the mainland during the 1950s.
By 1960, New York City’s Puerto Rican population was
nearly 100 times greater than it had been before the
Second World War. Large numbers of Puerto Ricans also
settled in Chicago, Boston, and Hartford, Connecticut,
during the 1950s. The commonwealth government of
Puerto Rico promoted immigration as a way of easing
population pressures, but it also encouraged migrants to
maintain cultural ties with the island. Officially U.S. citi-
zens, most of the newcomers spoke only Spanish, and the
formation of social and cultural clubs helped connect
them with the Puerto Rican communities they had left
behind.

At the same time, Puerto Ricans also began to form
organizations that could help address conditions in the
United States. The Puerto Rican–Hispanic Leadership
Forum, organized in 1957, presaged the emergence of groups
that looked more to social and economic conditions—
and, ultimately, greater political clout—in the United
States than to cultural affinities with Puerto Rico.

Meanwhile, large numbers of Spanish-speaking
people from Mexico continued moving to California and
the Southwest. There they settled, sometimes uncomfort-
ably, into already established Mexican American com-
unities. In 1940, Mexican Americans had been the most
rural of all the major ethnic groups; by 1950, in contrast,
more than 65 percent of Mexican Americans were living in
urban areas, a figure that would climb to 85 percent by
1970. As a result of this fundamental demographic shift,
Mexican Americans began to become an important political
force in many western and southwestern cities.

Controversy over continued immigration from Mexico
intensified during the early 1950s. Beginning in 1942 and
continuing until 1967, the U.S. government sponsored the
bracero (or farmhand) program, which brought nearly
5 million Mexicans across the U.S.–Mexican border, theo-
retically on short-term contracts, to fill agricultural jobs.
Many braceros and their families remained in the United
States, however, after these agreements expired. Legal immi-
igrants from Mexico, along with growing numbers of people
who filtered across the border, joined them.

“Operation Wetback,” an ongoing U.S. government
dragnet of the early 1950s, targeted undocumented
immigrants from Mexico. The choice of a term of ethnic
derision, which implied that all people of Mexican ances-
try had illegally swum across the Rio Grande River to
reach the United States, hardly built support for this pro-
gram in Mexican American communities. During a five-
year period, the U.S. government claimed to have
rounded up and deported to Mexico nearly 4 million
people, allegedly all undocumented immigrants. This
operation, its critics charged, not only swept up some
people who lacked ready documentation but served to
stigmatize longtime citizens of Mexican heritage and to
justify discriminatory treatment by local and state gov-
ernments and by employers.

Groups representing Mexican Americans gradually
broadened older struggles, which traced back to the 1930s
(see chapter 25), against discrimination. Labor organiz-
gers, often defying efforts by employers and FBI personnel
to label their efforts as “communist inspired,” sought
higher wages and better working conditions in the facto-
ries and fields. Unions with left-leaning political reputa-
tions and large Mexican American memberships, such as
the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied
Workers of America (UCAPAWA), faced ongoing

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harassment from the FBI, other governmental agencies, and private businesses. A lengthy strike in New Mexico by Mexican American zinc miners, who were affiliated with a union that had been expelled from the CIO in 1950, became the subject of the motion picture Salt of the Earth (1954). Pressure from Washington, the film industry, and anticommunist labor unions prevented, throughout the 1950s, popular distribution of this independent production, a collaboration among blacklisted filmmakers, striking miners, and their families.

At the same time, organizations representing Mexican American professionals, such as LULAC and the Unity League, parlayed their legal resources into lawsuits seeking the desegregation of schools and other public facilities in Southern California and throughout the Southwest. When preparing to go to court, however, lawyers for these groups immediately faced a strategic dilemma. Legal challenges brought on behalf of plaintiffs of African descent, as in the Brown cases, relied on the claim that state laws separating “whites” and “coloreds” violated guarantees of legal equality. Most states, though, classified persons whose ancestors came from Mexico—people who, theoretically, could be of “mixed” ancestry, including European, Indian, African, and even Asian—as legally “white.” In the area of education, as earlier cases such as Westminster had shown (see chapter 27), school officials in states such as California and Texas segregated students of Mexican descent on the basis of real and alleged “language deficiencies,” rather than on that of “race.” The “other white” legal status of Mexican Americans, in other words, complicated the ability of organizations such as LULAC to frame court challenges. In practice, it also prevented lawyers from automatically relying on precedents involving “white-against-black” discrimination.

Urban-Suburban Issues

The ongoing expansion of suburbia during the 1950s focused increasing attention on public policies related to cities. A variety of measures, adopted by both governmental and private institutions and organizations, for example, continued to shift resources away from cities, especially from neighborhoods with significant numbers of Latinos and African Americans. Continuing the now-familiar policy of red-lining, many banks and loan institutions denied funds for home-buyers and businesses in areas they considered “decaying” or “marginal.” Using the same supposedly neutral criteria employed for suburban loans, the lending industry saw these blighted areas as “bad risks.” They contained aging buildings, densely clustered homes, and growing numbers of low-income people, many of whom were of non-European descent. The FHA and other governmental agencies thus concentrated their activities in the newer suburbs. In 1960, for example, the FHA failed to put up a single dollar for home loan guarantees in Camden or Paterson, New Jersey, cities in which minority populations were growing, while it focused on the recently built, largely all-white suburbs that surrounded them.

“Urban renewal” programs, authorized by the Housing Act of 1949 (see chapter 27), according to numerous social-science studies, too often seemed aimed at “urban removal.” Although the law called for “a feasible method for the temporary relocation” of persons displaced by urban renewal projects, lax enforcement meant that developers could generally ignore the needs of these people. Throughout the 1950s, Robert Moses, who dominated the planning and execution of New York City’s vast construction projects, effectively concealed the number of people dislocated by his urban renewal and highway building programs. Although this unelected planner-bureaucrat always had his defenders, who insisted his vision ultimately encompassed the greater good of all residents, maps of New York City’s always changing landscape showed office buildings, freeways, and relatively expensive housing complexes inexorably replacing the older living units that people with low-income jobs could afford.

Roughly similar debates over goals and results—along with the same general patterns in building—marked the histories of other large cities during the 1950s. Plans for new, federally built public housing, for example, quickly faltered in most areas of the United States. Newer suburban areas with their middle-income homeowners used their political clout and local zoning laws to freeze out government-sponsored housing projects. In addition, private housing interests lobbied to limit the number of public units actually constructed, invariably on relatively expensive and already densely populated urban sites, and to deny them amenities, such as closets or closets with doors, that could be found in most private apartments. Publicly built facilities, originally conceived as short-term alternatives for families who would soon move to their own homes, became stigmatized as “the projects.” They gained reputations for being housing of last resort, reserved for people with chronically low incomes and meager prospects for economic advancement. In addition to disrupting urban housing patterns, renewal-removal projects also helped disperse industries that had long provided entry-level jobs for semi- and unskilled workers.

The urban-suburban policies of the 1950s, in short, seemed to be in need of major repair. In 1960, both the Democratic and Republican parties pledged to create a new cabinet office for urban affairs and to reconsider Washington’s role in addressing the cycle of continued suburban growth and onrushing urban decay.
Discussion of urban-suburban issues during the late 1950s accompanied a broader debate over how the national government in Washington might deal with a wide range of socioeconomic matters. Although Eisenhower sometimes hinted that he favored rolling back domestic programs established during the 1930s and 1940s, he possessed neither the political support nor the personal will to do so. Actually, his administration presided over a modest expansion of earlier initiatives: a larger Social Security system, a higher minimum wage, better unemployment benefits, and a new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). Eisenhower denied that this record suggested the White House favored “big government,” and insisted his approach represented a “moderate Republicanism.”

The New Conservatives

Eisenhower’s self-professed moderation on domestic issues angered a growing group of people who soon became known as the “new conservatives.” Conservatives within the GOP’s ranks conceded Eisenhower’s popularity—and the fact that he was the first Republican president since Herbert Hoover—but they also complained that his administration seldom represented the conservative principles for which the Republican Party supposedly stood. From their perspective, the Republicans who voted in support of domestic social programs looked as bad as the Northern Democrats with whom they often allied.

The most popular conservative Republican of the 1950s, Arizona’s Barry Goldwater, often voiced his doubts about the programmatic and regional shape of the national GOP. Ruggedly handsome and militantly anticommunist, Goldwater won election to the U.S. Senate in 1952. Once in Washington, he quickly emerged as the spokesperson for those Republicans who viewed Eisenhower’s policies as insufficiently conservative and too indebted to GOP constituencies on the East Coast. Goldwater once quipped that his party—and the nation—might be better off if someone could magically saw off the northern part of the eastern seaboard and let it drift out into the Atlantic, presumably toward a socialist-minded Europe.

Still, Goldwater took care to distinguish his conservatism from that of the “radical right,” whose attacks against Eisenhower sometimes veered into anti-Semitic diatribes and claims of Ike being a conscious agent of Moscow. Carefully framed and largely ghost-written, Goldwater’s The Conscience of a Conservative (1960) helped popularize his conservative critique. By refusing to seriously consider stronger military measures against the Soviet Union and by not making “victory the goal of U.S. policy,” he argued, Eisenhower had likely endangered national security with his version of containment. Goldwater also portrayed almost all domestic programs, including federal civil-rights legislation, as grave threats to individual liberty. The Eisenhower administration seemed largely content to follow the Democratic Party’s “New Deal antics” in its own domestic policy making, the Arizona senator alleged.

While Goldwater was pressing the GOP to reject Eisenhower’s moderate Republicanism, others, such as the publisher William F. Buckley, Jr., used the 1950s to frame a broadly conservative message for the 1960s. Buckley, who grew up in a wealthy, cosmopolitan, and fervently conservative family, first gained national attention while still in his twenties. In God and Man at Yale (1952), the devoutly Roman Catholic Buckley attacked what he saw as a “collectivist” and antireligious tilt in higher education. Most Ivy League educators, he claimed, would defend neither capitalism nor Christianity. Known for wrapping his brickbats in humor, Buckley once claimed that he would rather be governed by the first 2,000 names in the Boston phone book than by the faculty of Harvard.

Buckley helped found the National Review in 1955. This weekly magazine attracted a talented group of writers and avoided positions, particularly the anti-Semitism of some old-line conservatives and the hysterical anticommunism of groups such as the John Birch Society, which Democrats and members of the media could label as extremist. Buckley and his National Review colleagues, recognizing they could not refashion conservatism quickly, adopted strategies for the long run. To this end, they established Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) in 1960, several years before similar college-based political organizations emerged from the New Left (see chapter 29).

Adopting another long-term approach, called “fusionism,” to building a conservative movement, Buckley’s group avoided any strict litmus test. As a result, the National Review initially even provided a sounding board for Joe McCarthy’s embattled followers and for some southern segregationists. Relatively quickly, however, the magazine—and the larger movement it hoped to create—came to feature creative tension coming from three broad, not-always-compatible constituencies. This threesome included “traditionalist” conservatives, who insisted that social stability depended on jettisoning all notions of equality and allowing the educated-talented few, people such as themselves, to dominate the nation’s institutions. The magazine also published pieces by “libertarians,” people who rejected the hierarchical, anti-egalitarian
vision of more traditional conservatives but who favored reducing the power of government and enlarging the liberties of capitalist entrepreneurs. Finally, the National Review consistently featured staunch anticommunists, such as Barry Goldwater, who insisted that national power be used, far more aggressively than either Democratic or Republican administrations had done, to oppose Soviet-led communism.

Meanwhile, a different style of conservative activism emerged, at the grassroots, especially within many new suburban areas. Barry Goldwater’s brand of conservatism proved especially appealing to suburbanites in the “Sunbelt states” that stretched from California, across the Southwest, eastward through Texas, and over to Florida. Fiercely anticommunist, the “suburban warriors” from these areas, beginning with California, also framed a militantly conservative domestic agenda. It focused on keeping both state and national officials from using their power to infringe on what these conservative suburbanites considered liberties constitutionally reserved to their own local communities. They called for maintaining grassroots control of local school curricula, tough zoning laws, and the lowest possible rates of taxation, especially on real estate.

**Advocates of a More Active Government**

While the new conservative movement mobilized and, then, organized, in hopes of scaling back domestic social policies, an even more eclectic group tried to make the case for expanding governmental programs. Many of these commentators began by calling for greater activism from the office of the president.

The initial indecision by the White House during the 1957 situation at Little Rock’s Central High School suggested, at least to these critics, that Dwight Eisenhower held an unsteady grasp of domestic issues. The national election of 1956 had given him (and Vice President Nixon) another landslide victory over a Democratic ticket, headed again by Adlai Stevenson, but Eisenhower’s continued personal popularity had done even less for the Republican Party, which had failed to regain control of Congress, than in the 1952 contest. (The GOP would shed additional congressional seats—as well as state legislatures and governors’ mansions—in the mid-term races of 1958. After this election, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by nearly 2-to-1 margins in both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives.) Meanwhile, Eisenhower, who had rebounded from a mild heart attack before the 1956 election, seemed progressively enfeebled, physically as well as politically.

After the president suffered a second heart attack and a mild stroke during his second term, critics intensified calls for more vigorous leadership from the White House. Social activists criticized the reluctance to use Washington’s power to attack racial discrimination, and many economists, pointing to an economic downturn in 1958–59 when unemployment figures rose precipitously, ridiculed the Eisenhower administration’s commitment to a balanced budget. Even after economic conditions improved, economists such as John Kenneth Galbraith urged significant deficit spending by Washington as a spur to further growth. Eisenhower’s advisers stoutly resisted this advice.

Many of these critics, while avoiding the rhetoric of conservatives such as Goldwater, also found the Eisenhower administration’s national security moves to be insufficient. The 1957 Gaither Report, prepared by Paul Nitze and other people who had been associated with the NSC-68 document of 1950 (see chapter 27), savaged New Look policies. The Gaither Report claimed that the Soviet Union’s GNP was growing even more quickly than that of the United States and that a rapidly expanding military sector accounted for much of this expansion. The Gaither Report urged an immediate increase of about 25 percent in the Pentagon’s budget and a crash program for building fallout shelters. It also called for developing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and expanding conventional military forces. Another report, largely written by a young political scientist named Henry Kissinger and issued by the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation, argued that the New Look, by relying on massive nuclear retaliation and downplaying non-nuclear options, actually undermined national security. It joined the Gaither Report in seeking greater U.S. spending for a wide range of defense initiatives.

Eisenhower, who remained far more attentive to foreign policy than domestic issues, reacted cautiously. Although the White House agreed to accelerate the development of ICBMs, it opposed any significant effort to build fallout shelters or to expand existing capabilities for fighting limited, non-nuclear wars. In fact, the Eisenhower administration reduced the size of several army and air force units and kept its defense budget well below the levels critics had proposed. Eisenhower felt confident in pursuing this course because super-secret U-2 surveillance flights over the USSR revealed that the Soviets were lagging behind, rather than racing ahead of, the United States in military capability.

Concerns about national security and calls for greater government spending also affected U.S. educational policies. Throughout the 1950s, the more traditionalist educators had often complained about schools imparting “life adjustment” skills—getting along with others and adapting to social change—instead of teaching traditional academic subjects.
Rudolf Flesch’s best-selling Why Johnny Can’t Read (1956) anticipated books that asked why Johnny and his classmates couldn’t add or subtract very well either and why they lagged behind their counterparts in the Soviet Union in science. Washington’s help in funding K–12 instruction seemed an obvious way to upgrade educational performance. Simultaneously, the nation’s leading research universities sought greater federal aid. In summer 1957, a committee of prominent scientists implored the Defense Department to expand its support for basic scientific research. “Research is a requisite for survival” in the nuclear age, it declared.

The case for increased federal spending suddenly became more compelling. On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union orbited the world’s first artificial satellite, a 22-inch sphere called Sputnik, and seemingly soared far beyond the United States in both space exploration and military capabilities. The USSR could use the same missile technology needed to launch Sputnik, argued Eisenhower’s critics, to rain down nuclear weapons on U.S. cities. Effectively safeguarding U.S. national security, therefore, appeared to demand rebuilding, as rapidly as possible, the nation’s military arsenal, its educational institutions, and its research capabilities.

The specter of the original Sputnik, along with that of a second and much larger Soviet satellite, improved chances that a wide range of institutions, and not simply the Pentagon, would now obtain federal funding. Phrases such as “national security” and “national defense” seemed to clear the way for financial resources to flow more freely out of Washington. In 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which funneled aid to college-level programs in science, engineering, foreign languages, and the social sciences. This law marked a milestone in the long battle to overcome congressional opposition to federal funding of public education, especially from southern representatives who feared that aid from Washington could increase pressure for racial integration. Legislators also created another R&D effort, to be overseen by a new National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). This governmental agency pledged to harness U.S. educational and technological know-how so that the United States could counter the Soviet Union’s successes with its Sputniks and preserve outer space for the benefit of “all mankind.”

Many people also hoped that domestic social welfare programs would become the beneficiaries of increased federal spending. Galbraith’s The Affluent Society (1958) saw a dangerous tilt in the “social balance,” away from support for development of “public goods” and toward satisfaction of private desires. Already affluent families could afford to vacation in their own chrome-encrusted automobiles, but they would speed through shabby cities, motor along litter-filled roadsides, and gaze out at unsightly billboards. The researcher who developed a new carburetor is well rewarded, but anyone “who dreams up a new public service is [labeled] a wastrel,” Galbraith’s book sardonically noted.

Galbraith’s critique seemed mild when compared to that of Michael Harrington. His passionate essays about the persistence of poverty recalled his apprenticeship at Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker. In 1959, Commentary, one of several influential national magazines featuring social criticism, published an article, which was immediately noticed in policy-making circles. In this essay, Harrington insisted that the need to address economic inequality remained as urgent as it had been during the 1930s. At least one-third of the nation’s people—living in rural areas, small towns, and cities—barely subsisted in a land
of supposed abundance and affluence. Avoiding the usual trappings of economic analysis, Harrington crafted dramatic stories about how economic deprivation ravaged the bodies and spirits of people whose lives had been largely untouched by the economic growth of the 1940s and 1950s.

During the 1960s, when addressing social and economic issues became a priority among policy makers drawn to Washington, pundits such as Galbraith and Harrington became political celebrities. These same people had honed their critiques, however, within the vibrant political culture of the late 1950s. The brief presidency of John F. Kennedy would, in fact, feature calls for more active foreign and domestic policies that had first emerged during the 1950s.

The Kennedy Years: Foreign Policy

Focus Question What foreign and domestic policies did the Kennedy administration champion?

John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s wealthy, politically ambitious father, Joseph P. Kennedy, claimed to have groomed his son for the White House. The young Kennedy graduated from Harvard in 1940, won military honors while serving in the Navy during the Second World War, won a 1946 election to represent his home district in Massachusetts in the lower house of Congress, and captured a Senate seat in 1952. Once in Washington, Kennedy became better known for his social life than for his command of legislative details, but he quickly parlayed his charm and youthful good looks into political stardom. His 1953 marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier added yet another dash of glamour. A favorite of the media, Jackie won plaudits for her cultural tastes, choice in fashions, and fluency in several languages. After John Kennedy narrowly missed winning the Democratic vice presidential nomination in 1956, he immediately took aim at gaining the top spot on his party’s 1960 ticket.

The Election of 1960

JFK, often accompanied by Jackie and by his brothers, Robert and Edward (“Ted”) Kennedy, barnstormed across the country. This early presidential campaigning, along with a talented staff and his family’s vast wealth, helped Kennedy overwhelm his Democratic challengers, including Senators Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Lyndon Johnson of Texas. By pledging to separate his Roman Catholic faith from his politics and by confronting those who appealed to anti-Catholic prejudice, Kennedy tried to defuse the religious issue that had doomed the candidacy of Al Smith in 1928 (see chapter 24).

Richard Nixon, running as the Republican standard bearer, spent much of the 1960 presidential campaign on the defensive. A widespread perception that the still-popular Eisenhower remained unenthusiastic about a Republican candidate who had served as his vice-president for eight years hardly cheered Nixon. Still, he tried to counter Kennedy’s charisma with images of his own seasoned leadership, gained while at Ike’s side. Nixon seemed notably off-balance during the first of several televised debates in which a cool, tanned Kennedy emerged, according to surveys of TV viewers, with a clear victory over a pale, nervous Nixon. (People who listened on radio assigned Nixon considerably higher marks.) Despite chronic and severe health problems, which Kennedy’s entourage effectively concealed, JFK projected vigor and energy, if not experience.

Kennedy’s 1960 campaign highlighted issues from the 1950s that, taken together, morphed into an agenda JFK would call the “New Frontier.” Although Senator Kennedy’s civil-rights record had been mixed, candidate Kennedy declared his support for new congressional legislation. In an important symbolic act, he dispatched aides to Georgia to assist Martin Luther King, Jr., who was facing jail time for a minor traffic violation. Kennedy also promised to use the president’s executive authority, which Eisenhower had refused to do, to fight against job discrimination and to press for new social welfare programs to rebuild rural communities, increase educational opportunities, and improve urban conditions.

Kennedy’s New Frontier also recalled two other central issues of the late 1950s: promoting greater economic growth and conducting a more aggressive foreign policy. Dismissing Eisenhower’s economic policies as overly timid and largely ineffectual, Kennedy proposed using tax cuts and deficit spending to juice the economy. On foreign policy, he criticized Eisenhower for failing to rid Latin America, and Cuba, of Fidel Castro and for allowing a “missile gap” to develop between the United States and the Soviet Union. By spending more on defense, Kennedy claimed, the United States could respond, more flexibly, against communism, especially in the Third World. The “American people are tired of the drift in our national course . . . and they are ready to move again,” Kennedy proclaimed.

The closely contested 1960 presidential election defied easy analysis. Despite his early problems, Nixon ran a skilled campaign, and Kennedy outpolled him by only about 100,000 popular votes. Kennedy’s victory in
popular vote, a situation that occurred in the election produced a president who had failed to carry the electoral vote one day. Moreover, the consequences if the electoral college one day produced some discussion about the electoral vote produced some discussion about the consequences if the electoral college one day produced a president who had failed to carry the popular vote, a situation that occurred in the election of 2000.

In one of the closest elections in American history in terms of the popular vote, Kennedy only narrowly outpolled Nixon. Kennedy’s more commanding victory in the electoral vote produced some discussion about the consequences if the electoral college one day produced a president who had failed to carry the popular vote, a situation that occurred in the election of 2000.

the Electoral College, moreover, rested on razor-thin margins in several states, including Illinois. Many Republicans urged Nixon to challenge Kennedy’s suspicious vote total there, but the vice president chose to accept the disputed result. JFK’s triumph owed a great debt to his vice presidential running mate, Lyndon Baines Johnson. A tireless campaigner, LBJ gained credit for the Democratic ticket carrying the Deep South and his home state of Texas. Democrats remained the majority party in Congress and across the country, but this did not translate into a groundswell of support for Kennedy or his New Frontier.

JFK and Jackie achieved their earliest success by riveting media attention on the White House. They hobnobbed with movie stars and hosted prominent intellectuals. Kennedy’s debut as president featured designer clothing, a bright, “the name a journalist later bestowed (tongue in cheek) on the hard-driving people who joined Kennedy’s administration, promised to launch exciting and difficult crusades, even one to the frontier of outer space. Implicitly recalling the Soviet’s 1957 triumph with its Sputniks, JFK promised that the United States would beat the USSR in the ultimate event in the space race, landing a manned craft on the surface of the moon, before the end of the 1960s.

### Kennedy’s Foreign Policy Goals

Kennedy promised an aggressive national security stance, which would include new flexible-response capabilities. Although Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara quickly found that the alleged missile gap between the United States and the USSR had never existed, the Kennedy administration still boosted the defense budget. It strongly supported military assistance programs, informational initiatives, and covert-action planning. In one of his most popular innovations, the president created the Peace Corps, a volunteer program that would prepare Americans, especially young people, to assist struggling people in nations around the world. Once overseas, they would work on various projects aimed at improving living conditions and, additionally, undercutting the appeal of left-leaning, procommunist movements.

The Kennedy administration also repackaged Eisenhower’s effort to reorient U.S. Latin American policy. Kennedy’s “Alliance for Progress” elaborated on Ike’s earlier desire to move away from reliance on dictators and to support broadly conceived socioeconomic programs. Unveiled in spring 1961, in hopes of checking the spread of anti-Americanism and Castro-like insurgencies, the Alliance for Progress promised $20 billion in loans over a 10-year period to Latin American countries that would undertake land reform and economic development measures. Most Latin Americans judged Kennedy’s Alliance, which underestimated obstacles to social and economic innovation, as more of a symbolic gesture than a substantive blueprint for change in their region.

### Cuba and Berlin

The first serious setback for the Kennedy presidency, an ill-conceived 1961 CIA mission against Cuba, also had its roots in the Eisenhower administration. The CIA, looking to earlier covert actions against anti-American governments in Iran and Guatemala as models, had worked out a secret, Eisenhower-endorsed invasion to oust Fidel Castro. Overriding dissent from some of his advisers, Kennedy reaffirmed White House support for this plan. On April 17, 1961, however, when U.S.-backed and -trained forces (mainly anticommunist Cuban exiles) landed at the Bahía de Cochinas (the Bay of Pigs) on the southern coast of Cuba, the popular uprising, which the CIA had predicted, failed to materialize.
Instead, forces loyal to Castro quickly surrounded and captured the invaders. Confronting a badly planned and poorly executed operation, Kennedy rejected any additional steps, including last-minute U.S. air strikes that CIA operatives had apparently misled their Cuban allies into believing were part of the plan. The White House initially tried to deny any U.S. involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion, but the CIA’s role quickly became public knowledge. A new wave of anti-Yankee sentiment swept across much of Latin America, and Castro used the invasion as justification for further tightening his grip over Cuban life and strengthening his ties to the Soviet Union.

Kennedy responded to the Bay of Pigs by admitting error and by devising new anti-Castro strategies. “I have made a tragic mistake,” Kennedy told one adviser. “Not only were our facts in error, but our policy was wrong.” Stung by the failed invasion, the White House continued to target Castro with a covert program, “Operation Mongoose.” It included efforts to destabilize Cuba’s economy and, in concert with organized crime figures, to assassinate the Cuban leader.

Meanwhile, two other dramatic confrontations began unfolding, more slowly, in Berlin and in Cuba. In June 1961, Nikita Khrushchev and Kennedy met in Vienna, Austria, where the Soviets proposed ending the Western presence in Berlin and reuniting the city as part of East Germany. Khrushchev’s initiative responded to the steady flow of immigrants from East Germany into West Berlin, a migration that was both politically embarrassing and economically draining to the German communist regime. Kennedy refused to abandon West Berlin, and in August 1961, with Soviet approval, East Germany began to erect first a barbed-wire fence and then a concrete barrier to separate East from West Berlin. This “Berlin Wall” became a symbol of communist repression. Kennedy’s assertion, “Ich bin ein Berliner,” delivered in front of the wall to a cheering crowd of West Berliners, provided a memorable moment in his presidency.

Superpower confrontation escalated to a potentially lethal, even catastrophic, level during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Responding to pleas from Fidel Castro and seeing Kennedy, especially after their personal meeting in Vienna, as an inexperienced bungler, Khrushchev took a bold gamble: He began sending advanced Soviet armaments to Cuba. After a U-2 spy plane showed missile-launching sites in Cuba, the Kennedy administration announced it would not allow the Soviet Union to place nuclear warheads so close to U.S. soil. It demanded that the Soviets dismantle the missile silos and turn back its supply ships, presumably containing the warheads, then heading for Cuba.

The Cuban Missile Crisis began in earnest. After tense strategizing sessions with his top advisers, Kennedy rejected calls by some military leaders, notably General Curtis LeMay, for a strike against Cuba. JFK thus heeded warnings that any such rash action risked escalating into nuclear warfare between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, Kennedy ordered the U.S. Navy to “quarantine” Cuba. The president did authorize Strategic Air Command (SAC) to go on full alert, in preparation for a possible nuclear conflict. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later recalled leaving a presidential conference during the 13-day crisis, looking up at the sky, and wondering if the world would still be there 24 hours later. Reflections of this kind encouraged both the United States and the USSR to engage in secret diplomatic maneuvers to forestall a military showdown.

Delicate maneuvering by both governments (and several private go-betweens) finally ended the standoff. On October 28, 1962, Khrushchev ordered the Soviet missiles in Cuba to be dismantled and the supply ships to sail for home; Kennedy pledged not to invade Cuba and secretly promised to complete a previously ordered withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey. When researchers finally gained access to Soviet archives during the mid-1990s, they discovered that the Missile Crisis had been even more dangerous than U.S. officials had ever imagined. Unknown to anyone in the Kennedy administration in 1962, the Soviets had already placed in Cuba tactical nuclear weapons, which could have been launched against U.S. targets in retaliation for any air strike.

The Missile Crisis underscored how easily the United States and the USSR could careen toward nuclear conflict, and the dangers of October 1962 encouraged the two nuclear superpowers to begin moving with greater caution. To prevent a similar confrontation or an accident involving nuclear weapons, they established a direct telephone hotline between Moscow and Washington, D.C. Later, during a spring 1963 commencement address at American University, Kennedy underscored the importance of the United States working to promote world peace. Some Kennedy watchers, then as well as now, have argued that this American University speech portended what a second JFK administration would have attempted to achieve in foreign policy.

**Southeast Asia and “Flexible Response”**

Meanwhile, though, in Southeast Asia, Kennedy continued earlier U.S. attempts to preserve a noncommunist state in South Vietnam. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, in which the attempt to overthrow an already established communist government had failed, JFK seemed more determined than before to prevent any communist-led “war of national liberation” from ever succeeding.
Even so, the odds against preserving a pro-U.S. government in South Vietnam seemed to grow ever longer as Kennedy’s own presidency lengthened. Opposition to the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, who had been in power since 1954, had now coalesced in the National Liberation Front (NLF). Formed in December 1960, the NLF included nationalist factions that resented Diem’s dependence on the United States, communists who demanded more extensive land reform, an array of political leaders who were fed up with Diem’s corruption and cronyism, and groups beholden to Ho Chi Minh’s communist government in the North. North Vietnam began sending additional supplies and, then, thousands of its own troops to the South to support the NLF.

The Kennedy administration saw Vietnam as a test case for its anticommunist strategy, especially the doctrine of flexible response. Although it accepted a 1962 deal that created a technically neutral but communist-influenced government in Laos, the White House appeared determined to hold the line in South Vietnam. Washington trained elite U.S. troops, the Green Berets, in counterinsurgency tactics; sent teams of social scientists, charged with nation building, to advise South Vietnam on socioeconomic policies; and dispatched other experts to train that nation’s internal security forces. Finally, the Kennedy administration deployed, in ever larger increments, nearly 11,000 U.S. troops who would supposedly only advise, rather than actively fight alongside, South Vietnamese forces.

These U.S. moves seemed to create only new opportunities for corruption and greater distrust between South Vietnam’s government and its citizens. When U.S. officials became aware that disgruntled South Vietnamese military officers were planning to topple Diem’s already tottering regime, they gave them a green light to continue orchestrating their plan. In November 1963, the conspirators routed Diem—an act that could hardly have surprised the Kennedy administration—from his presidential palace and—in a genuine shock to U.S. officials—summarily murdered him. This coup d’état, which brought a military regime to power in Saigon, appeared to create even greater political instability in South Vietnam. The NLF and North Vietnam, in turn, ratcheted up their military pressure on the new government in Saigon.

The Southeast Asian policy of Kennedy’s administration seemed no more coherent than that of Eisenhower’s. The overall goal, to be sure, remained consistent: prevent communist forces from toppling any anticommunist government in Saigon. The United States could not afford to “lose” South Vietnam. Although some in JFK’s inner circle urged sending U.S. combat forces into battle, the president continued to reject this option. On several occasions, the White House even talked about withdrawing some of its combat-ready advisers, perhaps as a substantive shift in policy or as a public relations move. As with his domestic agenda, Kennedy’s presidency ended, unexpectedly, with its future direction in Vietnam in a state of flux or, perhaps, even disarray.

The Kennedy Years: Domestic Policy

Kennedy hesitated to follow up on his campaign proposal of increasing federal spending to speed economic growth. He feared that federal budget deficits might cost him support among fiscal conservatives and business leaders. Relations with corporate leaders, nevertheless, did turn temporarily ugly in 1962, when Kennedy clashed with the president of U.S. Steel over that company’s decision to raise its prices beyond the guidelines suggested by the White House. Recoiling from this imbroglio, the Kennedy administration hoped to chart a steadier domestic course. Events did not always cooperate.

Policy Making during the Early 1960s

In 1962, the White House staff finally sat down with key members of Congress to discuss lowering tax rates as a means of promoting economic growth. The economy had nicely rebounded from its downturn of 1957–58, but proponents of a tax cut promised even more rapid growth. Lower tax rates for everyone and special deductions for businesses that invested in new plants and equipment, the tax-cutters argued, would spur investment in facilities and jobs. Despite opposition from those Democrats who thought these changes tilted toward corporations and the wealthy, the tax bill seemed headed for passage in the fall of 1963.

Most of Kennedy’s ideas about social welfare policy recalled earlier proposals. There was talk of raising the federal minimum wage rate and of new urban rebuilding programs. Under the programs begun during the 1940s, Kennedy-era bulldozers continued to raze large parts of urban America, still at the expense, critics charged, of people who desperately needed affordable housing. One new departure, the Area Redevelopment Bill of 1961, called for directing federal grants and loans to areas, such as Appalachia, that the economic growth of the 1940s and 1950s had largely bypassed.
The Civil-Rights Movement, 1960–1963

Although JFK had talked about supporting new civil-rights legislation, he also tried to placate the segregationist wing of his Democratic Party. Initially, the Kennedy administration assigned greater priority to the fight against organized crime than the one against racial discrimination. The president and his brother, Robert, whom he had appointed attorney general, listened sympathetically when J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, falsely warned of continuing links between Martin Luther King, Jr., and members of the American Communist Party. To monitor King’s activities and gather information that Hoover would later use to smear the civil-rights leader, the FBI intensified surveillance, illegally tapped King’s phone conversations, and placed “bugs” in his hotel rooms.

Meanwhile, in early 1960, African American students at North Carolina A&T, a historically black college in Greensboro, sat down at a drugstore lunch counter and politely asked to be served in the same manner as white customers. This “sit-in” marked an intensification of direct action. Young activists directly challenged local segregation laws by acting as if these measures simply did not exist. Targeting locations in both the South and the North, demonstrators staged nonviolent sit-ins at restaurants, bus and train stations, and other public facilities.

The courage and commitment of these demonstrators brought new energy—and media attention—to the antidiscrimination movement. Singing anthems such as “We Shall Overcome” and “Oh, Freedom” to promote solidarity, young people pledged their talents, their resources—indeed, their lives—to the civil-rights struggle. In 1961, an interracial group of activists from CORE and a new group that had emerged from the sit-in movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), risked racist retaliation by conducting “freedom rides” across the South. The freedom riders were challenging the Kennedy administration to enforce the federal court decisions that had declared state laws requiring segregation on interstate buses (and in bus stations) to be unconstitutional.

This grassroots activism forced the Kennedy administration into action of its own. It first dispatched U.S. marshals to protect the freedom riders from racist violence. In 1962 (and again the following year), the White House called on National Guard troops and federal marshals to prevent pro-segregationist mobs from halting court-ordered integration at several educational institutions in the Deep South, including the Universities of Mississippi and Alabama. In November 1962, Kennedy issued a long-promised executive order that banned racial discrimination in federally financed housing. The following February, he sent Congress a civil-rights bill that called for faster trials in lawsuits seeking to tear down barriers designed to prevent African Americans in the South from voting. Events of the early 1960s, especially in the South, however, always seemed to outpace the Kennedy administration’s initiatives.

The racist violence that convulsed Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 highlighted this dynamic. Birmingham’s all-white police force unleashed dogs and high-pressure water hoses on African Americans, including young children, who were peacefully demonstrating on behalf of desegregating that city’s public facilities. White supremacists later murdered four young girls and injured twenty other people when they bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a center of the civil-rights campaign in Birmingham. After thousands of angry African Americans rallied in protest—and two more children were killed, this time by police officers—the Kennedy administration finally moved to staunch the bloodletting.

By this time, however, the determination and courage of civil-rights activists in defying the violence in Birmingham had produced another real-life, televised drama for the entire world to watch. Kennedy finally entered the picture. During an emotion-filled national television address, the president pleaded for a national commitment to the battle against discrimination. Recent events in Alabama, he declared, had raised “a moral issue . . . as old as Scriptures and . . . as clear as the Constitution.” The time for “patience” and “delay,” Kennedy announced, had passed. Racial strife was already “retarding our Nation’s economic and social progress and weakening the respect with which the rest of the world regards us.” Against the backdrop of a televised battle line that seemed to stretch across the South, the issue of civil rights dominated national politics during the last six months of Kennedy’s presidency.

The White House still hoped it might influence the direction and moderate the pace of change. It crafted additional legislation designed to dampen the enthusiasm for civil-rights demonstrations, without further inflaming white segregationists. Its proposed bill called for a ban against racial discrimination in public facilities and housing and for new measures to protect the voting rights of African Americans in the South. When the administration recognized that its legislative proposals would not derail a “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” planned for the late summer of 1963, it belatedly endorsed the event, sponsored by a coalition of civil-rights and labor organizations.

On August 28, 1963, an integrated group of more than 200,000 people marched through the nation’s capital.
to the Lincoln Memorial. There, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Most other speakers generally applauded Kennedy’s latest initiatives, but some urged a broader agenda. Demands included a higher minimum wage and a federal program to guarantee new jobs. Well-organized and smoothly run, this one-day demonstration received overwhelmingly favorable coverage from the national media, especially television, and put even greater political pressure on the White House and Congress to lend their assistance to the movement.

Women’s Issues

The seeds of a resurgent women’s movement were also being sown, although more quietly, during the early 1960s. All across the political spectrum, women began speaking out more forcefully and visibly than they had during the 1950s. The energy of suburban warriors on the political right nurtured the grassroots of their movement. Phyllis Schlafly, whose book *A Choice, Not an Echo* (1964) became one of the leading conservative manifestos, suggested how women could blend careers in politics with ones as wives and mothers. African American activists such as Bernice Johnson Reagon (whose work with the Freedom Singers combined music and social activism) and Fannie Lou Hamer (who spearheaded the organization of a racially integrated Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi) fought discrimination based on both race and gender. Female union leaders pushed for greater employment opportunities and more equitable workplace environments. Chicana farm workers became key figures in union organizing efforts in California. Women also played an important role through organizations such as the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and the Women’s Strike for Peace in orchestrating opposition to the U.S.–Soviet arms race.

During Kennedy’s final year in office, 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which observers soon credited for helping to revive organized feminist activity in the United States. Friedan’s book drew on her own social criticism from the late 1950s. Decrying the narrow confines of domestic life and the lack of public roles available to well-educated women, it resonated with
Anxious to address women’s concerns, Kennedy appointed a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. Negotiating differences between moderate and more militant members, the commission issued a report that documented discrimination against women in employment opportunities and wages. Kennedy responded with a presidential order designed to eliminate gender discrimination within the federal civil service system. His administration also supported the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which made it a federal crime for employers to pay lower wages to women who were doing the same work as men.

The Assasination of John F. Kennedy

During fall 1963, the Kennedy White House, although still struggling to reframe both its domestic and foreign policies, expected JFK would rather easily win reelection in 1964. Then, around noon time, on November 22, 1963, the president was shot dead as his motorcade moved through Dealey Plaza in Dallas. Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who had accompanied Kennedy to Texas, hurriedly took the oath of office and then rushed back to Washington. Equally quickly, the Dallas police arrested Lee Harvey Oswald and pegged him as JFK’s assassin. Oswald had loose ties to organized crime, had once lived in the Soviet Union, and had a bizarre set of political affiliations, including shadowy connections with groups interested in Cuba. Oswald, who declared his innocence, never faced trial. Jack Ruby, whose Dallas nightclub catered to powerful underworld figures, killed Oswald, on national television, while the alleged gunman was in police custody. A hastily conducted investigation by a special commission headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren concluded that both Oswald and Ruby had acted alone.

The Warren Commission’s account of a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, came under intense scrutiny. Competing theories about the number of shots, the trajectory of the bullets, the nature of Kennedy’s wounds, and the identity of his assassins began to proliferate. Over time, a myriad of conspiratorial scenarios—including ones pointing toward the CIA, high-ranking governmental officials, Castro’s Cuba, anti-Castro Cubans, organized crime, and even Lyndon Johnson—took flight. Oliver Stone’s JFK (1991) refocused attention on obvious shortcomings in the Warren Commission Report (see History Through Film feature).

Kennedy’s life and presidency remain topics of lively historical debate and tabloid-style speculation. Researchers have provided new details about his poor health, reliance on exotic medications, and dalliances with women, all of which his loyal aides and a compliant press had once kept from public view. As historians speculate about how such revelations might have affected Kennedy’s ability to make crucial decisions, they continue to debate older questions, particularly what JFK might have done in Vietnam and on the domestic front had he won the 1964 presidential election. The passage of time, in short, has diminished neither scholarly nor popular interest in John F. Kennedy and his 1,000-day presidency.
FK addressed two issues that have long intrigued the historical profession and the general public: Did John F. Kennedy fall victim to a lone assassin or a larger conspiracy? How might the course of U.S. history, including the nation’s involvement in Vietnam, have been different if Kennedy’s presidency had not ended in November 1963?

This movie restaged the 1967 criminal prosecution by Jim Garrison, then the district attorney of New Orleans, against Clay Shaw, a local business leader. This real-life court case provided a cinematic vehicle for speculating that a shadowy conspiracy—invoking government officials, military officers, and business executives—killed Kennedy because of fears he planned to end the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.

To dramatize its claims, the movie JFK could employ techniques obviously unavailable to scholars who articulated their views through books and articles. When the Garrison character screens the famous “Zapruder film,” the home movie that provides the only visual record of Kennedy’s shooting, JFK inserts simulated, black-and-white images of sharpshooters catching the president in a deadly cross-fire. Later, the movie shows a mysterious figure planting the “magic bullet,” a nearly pristine projectile the Warren Commission insisted came from the rifle of Lee Harvey Oswald and passed through Kennedy’s body, on a hospital gurney.

JFK ranks as vintage Oliver Stone. The most prolific and controversial filmmaker-historian of his time, Stone delighted in disrupting dominant narratives about the past. His most successful historical movies—JFK, Platoon (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), The Doors (1991), and Nixon (1995)—all featured stories riddled by disjuncture and uncertainty. When the Garrison character in JFK decides to challenge the official story of the Kennedy assassination, he warns his staff, “we’re through the looking glass . . . white is black, and black is white.”

Resembling Stone’s equally controversial Natural Born Killers (1994), JFK focuses less on telling a coherent tale than using the movie screen to suggest tangled relationships between visual imagery and popular perception. The opening sequence of JFK bombards the screen with quick-moving, seemingly disconnected images. Viewers, as if they too are passing “through the looking glass,” must struggle to connect the disjointed visual pieces contained in the cinematic puzzle that is JFK.

The movie, in this sense, seemed more interested in posing, rather than settling, historical questions. Viewers might compare and contrast, for example, how JFK uses two very differently composed sequences, featuring performances by two very different character actors (Donald Sutherland and Joe Pesci), to explain Kennedy’s assassination as only one in a long line of “dirty tricks” orchestrated by a military-industrial complex. During a scene shot against the iconography of the nation’s capital—which recalls Frank Capra’s classic Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)—Sutherland calmly offers Garrison (and film viewers) a logically ordered, tightly packaged analysis of Kennedy’s assassination. In contrast, the brief sequence featuring Joe Pesci’s frenetic David Ferrie—a real-life foot soldier in organized crime and Cuban-exile circles, whom some investigators link to JFK’s assassination—lacks any coherent center. This character, in contrast to Sutherland’s, warns Garrison that no one will ever puzzle out Kennedy’s death.

JFK, the movie, raised such a popular furor that it led to a massive, congressionally ordered project to safeguard all government documents that might relate to Kennedy’s assassination. Will these traditional sources bring historians any closer to solving, beyond reasonable doubts, the Kennedy case? Or, as Joe Pesci’s character warns in JFK, do historians confront “a mystery, inside a riddle, wrapped in an enigma”?
Conclusion

After 1953, conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union increasingly migrated to the Third World, where conflict over Cuba, in 1962, brought the two superpowers to the brink of nuclear war. Even on those occasions, such as after the Missile Crisis, when signs of tension with the USSR seemed to subside, the United States continued to chart a determinedly anti-communist course. It pursued the buildup of nuclear weapons, new forms of economic pressure, and expanded abilities to conduct covert activities. Developments in the Third World, particularly in Cuba and Southeast Asia, became of growing concern to U.S. policy makers.

At home, the economy grew steadily between 1953 and 1963. A cornucopia of new consumer products encouraged talk about an age of affluence and abundance but also produced apprehension about conformity, unruly youth, and mass culture. At the same time, the millions of people sidelined by economic inequality and often disadvantaged by racial and ethnic discrimination moved to the center of public debate over liberty and equality. Some critics charged that the Eisenhower administration seemed overly cautious in using the power of government to spread affluence more widely or to fight discrimination. More quietly, particularly in the political and cultural arenas, a new conservative movement also began to take shape. These critics from the right claimed that Eisenhower and JFK used the power of government too much, not too little.

The policy initiatives of the Kennedy administration grew, in large part, from the political, social, and cultural criticism of the 1950s. Although Kennedy preferred to focus on matters of foreign policy, the press of events, particularly those associated with the civil-rights movement, forced the president to consider how the power of his office might be used to address the issues of liberty and equality at home.

The post-Kennedy era would continue to highlight questions about liberty, equality, and power. Was the United States encouraging freedom in the Third World, particularly in Vietnam? Was it sufficiently active in supporting equalitarian movements at home? The troubled era of “America’s longest war,” 1963–74, would turn on how different people attempted to respond to these questions.
Questions for Review and Critical Thinking

Review

1. In what ways did the “New Look” reorient the foreign policy of containment?
2. How could economic growth seem to be both an opportunity and a problem during the 1950s?
3. How did the fight against discrimination raise new political issues and visions during the 1950s and early 1960s? How did the nation’s political and social institutions respond to these issues?
4. What foreign and domestic policies did the Kennedy administration champion?

Critical Thinking

1. How were the policies of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations toward the Cold War, discrimination, and economic growth both different and similar?
2. Why does the relatively brief presidency of JFK loom so large in popular memory?

Identifications

Review your understanding of the following key terms, people, and events for this chapter (terms are defined or described in the Glossary at the end of the book).

Third World
U-2 spy plane
massive retaliation
Open Skies
yankeephobia
Eisenhower Doctrine
affluence
Highway Act of 1956
Betty Friedan
Elvis Presley
rock ’n’ rollers
Dr. Benjamin Spock
Brown v. Board of Education
Rosa Parks
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Montgomery bus boycott
Civil Rights Act of 1957
termination and relocation
red-lining
Sputnik
John F. Kennedy
flexible response
Bay of Pigs
Cuban Missile Crisis
sit-in movement
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
freedom riders

DOING HISTORY ONLINE

A Warning about the Future: President Dwight Eisenhower’s Farewell Address, 1961

Dwight D. Eisenhower served as president during the height of Cold War tensions at home and abroad. His administration saw the vast buildup of the security apparatus and the new military capabilities that became a part of American life during those years. When he left office, he expressed serious concerns about the military buildup and its potential impact on American institutions and values. Read his two inaugural addresses and his farewell address.

Visit the ThomsonNOW Web site at www.thomsonedu.com/login/ to access primary sources and answer questions related to this topic. These exercise modules allow students to e-mail their responses directly to professors from the Web site.

Suggested Readings


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