Introduction to the 1950s (Overview)

At the opening of the decade, the United States found itself in the enviable position of being far and away the most powerful nation on earth. Its industrial base, undamaged and strengthened by World War II, manufactured over half the world's products.

America itself proved the biggest single consumer of this outpouring. Denied many goods during the austere war years, citizens rushed to buy everything that appeared on the new peacetime market, resulting in a period of unparalleled economic expansion that lasted through the decade.

Cold War Anxieties

In August 1949, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had exploded its first atomic bomb. This blast would cast a pall over the ensuing decade. Fear of nuclear annihilation became an underlying anxiety. By mid-decade, ominous reports of huge Russian intercontinental missiles circulated.

Officials put into place a civil defense system that included aircraft spotters and buildings designated as fallout shelters for protection from deadly radiation. Public schools had their "Duck and Cover" drills. At the news of approaching planes, students were instructed to duck under whatever was close by (such as their desk) and cover their heads with their arms for additional protection.

Also at the start of the decade communist North Korea, backed with equipment and financial support from the Chinese government, attacked South Korea. The United States and other nations stepped in to protect democratic South Korea.

In October 1957, the USSR launched Sputnik, the first unmanned spacecraft. No one had expected the Soviets to be the first into space; it served as a disquieting moment for any lingering notions of inherent American superiority. Part of the American response to Sputnik involved spending vast sums of government money to catch up. In spring 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower asked Congress to create the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and a new component to the ongoing arms race—the space race—was officially on.

Against the backdrop of the Cold War and a distant war in Korea being waged against Communist adversaries, a climate of fear and suspicion descended on the nation. This divisive atmosphere struck Hollywood particularly hard. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) subpoenaed many Hollywood personalities, including actors, producers, directors, and writers, who faced a dilemma: whether or not to inform on their colleagues about possible Communist ties.

In February 1950, Joseph McCarthy, a Republican senator from Wisconsin, said he had evidence that 205 active Communist agents had been employed at the State Department. Leading the Senate Investigations
Subcommittee, McCarthy launched a campaign based on fears, innuendo, and smears to track down Communists in government. By 1957, some six million individuals had been investigated by various related agencies and committees because of alleged sympathies to the Communist cause.

This frenzied search for Communists was famously challenged in March 1954 by TV newsman Edward R. Murrow, who aired a special program about McCarthy. Murrow and producer Fred R. Friendly produced and aired the show at their own expense. Despite its lack of network and commercial support, the presentation gave viewers a rare picture of the senator, most of it in his own words, exposing his crude, intimidating attacks on individuals and institutions.

In 1956, the Senate took away McCarthy's chair of the investigative committee and eventually censured him. He died the following year. That same year, the Supreme Court began to restore rights taken away from Americans by the "red scare" hearings. The term "McCarthyism" has come to mean unfair, unsupported attacks on individuals.


**Eisenhower and the Rise of Televised Politics**

President Eisenhower was a seasoned military leader elected to the presidency in 1952 and 1956. For most Americans, he presented an image of calm authority and his conservative, patriarchal approach to a dangerous world reassured nervous citizens.

The decade marked the increased use of public relations and advertising techniques in the political arena, including Eisenhower's popular campaign slogan "We Like Ike." The importance of strong media ties could be seen in the Republican and Democratic national conventions held in July 1952. The first such political conventions to be televised, delegates were aware of cameras and microphones everywhere, and their presence had a clear effect. Little deal making could take place outside the range of the omnipresent cameras, a decided change from the smoke-filled rooms of the past. As Republican enthusiasm for Eisenhower grew, the unblinking gaze of the national media helped him win on the first ballot.

In the midst of the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower's running mate, California senator Richard M. Nixon, was accused of improperly using funds and accepting gifts. Alarmists urged Eisenhower to drop Nixon from the ticket. In response, Nixon turned to television and delivered his famous "Checkers" speech, a moment in television history that illustrated the enormous power the medium could wield.

An estimated audience of 58 million heard and saw his denials. "Checkers" was a cute cocker spaniel, a gift Nixon challenged anyone to take from his daughters. His somewhat melodramatic defense played well; audiences viewed the charges against him as ham-handed attempts by overzealous Democrats to discredit him and Eisenhower retained Nixon on the ticket.

**Prosperity and Credit Card Culture**
Between 1950 and 1960, the gross national product escalated from $285 billion to $500 billion and median family income almost doubled. Food, clothing, and shelter no longer took away so much of each paycheck, freeing families to spend purchase new cars, televisions, high-fidelity units, and more.

Nevertheless, pockets of poverty persisted in postwar America. Many African Americans still toiled in underpaid, low-status jobs and lived in substandard housing. Working women's salaries continued to lag behind those of their male counterparts.

In 1950, Diner's Club began issuing wallet-sized credit cards to members. At first, Diner's Club limited its use to restaurants in the New York City area, but the idea caught on and rapidly expanded. In 1958, American Express started issuing cards of its own, and a year later Bank of America brought out its first BankAmericard (which later became Visa).

This new approach to credit represented a financial, technological, and sociological breakthrough. It meant that those extending credit were guaranteed payment and that individuals no longer had to rely on cash or checks to make purchases. This led to a fundamental change in American buying habits in the later 1950s and 1960s.

The credit card revolution also reflected a profound transformation in attitudes about debt. Prior to World War II, most families owed as little as possible because they were imbued with an ethic that frowned on indebtedness. In addition, most merchants demanded full payment for goods. Following the war, the rules changed as businesses exhibited a willingness to extend credit to their newly affluent customers. With credit so readily available, private debt increased sharply, going from $73 billion in 1950 to $196 billion in 1960.

Family Life

The family itself changed significantly during this period. By 1958, almost one-third of all Americans were 15 years old or younger. The skyrocketing number of children was referred to as the "baby boom" and it proved an economic bonanza for retailers.

When real-life husband and wife performers Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball were expecting their second child they decided to write the pregnancy into their popular TV show, I Love Lucy. The birth of "little Ricky," son of the Desi and Lucille's TV characters, Ricky and Lucy Ricardo, in early 1953 (filming took place in November 1952) was one of the most watched events in the history of American television.

In addition to I Love Lucy, shows like Father Knows Best, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, Leave It to Beaver, Make Room for Daddy, and The Donna Reed Show painted a rose-colored picture of the decade that has persisted as a nostalgic perception of the 1950s.

Throughout the 1950s, popular media portrayed smiling American women in the home wearing elegant dresses, high heels, and jewelry (pearl necklaces were especially popular), as they dusted and vacuumed. Some even wore crowns in ads portraying women as queens of domesticity.

Widely accepted in the popular mind, this comforting and stereotypical picture was challenged by real-
life wives, many of whom worked outside the home. By 1960, over 23 million American women, or 36% of all women, had jobs outside the home, a figure that includes 33% of all married women.

Civil Rights

In 1954, civil rights took center stage as a national issue when the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. the Board of Education that school systems could no longer segregate children by race as long as the schools were "separate but equal," as had been the legal standard previously.

A year later, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, and the nation again had to look at the artificial separation of people by race. The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycotts saw the ascendancy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as a spokesman for cause of integration, and more Americans began to realize that racial segregation could not remain a part of the fabric of American life.

In one of the many obstacles to the implementation of the Supreme Court's Brown decision, Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus refused to protect black students attempting to integrate Little Rock High School in 1957, compelling President Eisenhower to call in federal troops. By this time, the television cameras had already arrived on the scene, and the national nightly news detailed the unfolding stories of rage and repression.

As the civil rights movement shifted into high gear, American mass media became an unblinking witness. By the end of the decade, the nation found itself poised to enter into one of the greatest social changes of the century.

Bob Batchelor

Select Citation Style: MLA

MLA