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Article Summary: America felt relatively tranquil in the 1950s. To those who were enjoying a newfound post-war prosperity it seemed that problems like discrimination, poverty, and racism would solve themselves.

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Photographs / Images: inset upper section of the *Lincoln-Star* front page for August 6, 1945, with the headline "Atomic Bomb Released on Japs By Yanks"; building Interstate 80; the group Omaha Action holding a vigil outside an ICBM site near Mead to protest nuclear weapons in 1959; Mrs Raymond Baker and her daughters in the family's basement fallout shelter, 1960; contestants in a hula hoop contest at Gold's department store in Lincoln in 1958; picking corn near Minden, probably in the late 1940s; *Electric Farmer* cover showing a rural woman using her dual-oven range; Ken Eddy's Drive In, Lincoln, 1952; Ward Justus family of Lincoln watching television, 1950; inset advertisement for an Elvis Presley concert at the University of Nebraska Coliseum, *Lincoln Star*, May 18, 1956

# THE 1950s

## A Retrospective View

By Michael W. Schuyler

Events such as the Vietnam War and Watergate, the increase in crime, violence, and racial conflict, the breakdown of the liberal consensus, and revelations about the personal and political immorality of the nation's leaders have raised serious questions about the genius of American politics. The United States is clearly anxious and worried about its future. This crisis of confidence has caused many Americans, faced with the increasing complexity of the modern world, to look to history not only for an explanation for what went wrong, but also to search for a golden age in America when the public was happy and secure. Many people, and especially those who learn their history by watching television and movies, have embraced the view that the period following the end of World War II until the assassination of John F. Kennedy was such an age. Supposedly during this period, which broadly conceived will be referred to as the 1950s, the nation's leaders were honest and trustworthy, Americans shared a patriotic commitment to a clearly defined national purpose, and families, committed to traditional values, lived simple but virtuous lives. Unfortunately, public imagination often has little in common with historical reality.

Professional historians have engaged in a protracted debate about the meaning and historical significance of the 1950s. Although debates among histori-

ans about how to interpret the past are commonplace, discussions about the post-World War II period have been especially bitter. Historians have divided into warring camps for at least two major reasons. First, as Eric Goldman suggests, the magnitude of the events and the decisions made about government policy during the "crucial decade and after," continue to have a profound impact on American history and life. For example, Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japanese cities to end the war inevitably stirs emotions and invites controversy. Even more important, the initial evaluations of the 1950s coincided with the breakdown of the American consensus and the beginning of radical protest during the late 1950s and early 1960s. As a result historians, and especially those identified with "neoconsensus" and "New Left" schools of thought, approached the post-World War II period from fundamentally different ideological perspectives.

While some historians, especially biographers of Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, found much that was positive in the 1950s, others viewed the era at best as a time of "postponement" and at worst as a "nightmare" decade. More recently, as the ideological battles of the 1960s and 1970s begin to fade, historians have presented more balanced and more complex views of the 1950s. Rather than approaching the postwar period with an ideological lens from the Left or the Right, most recent scholars emphasize that the nation's history, and the generation that responded to the challenges of the time, were shaped by the American

experience during the 1930s, World War II, and the bewilderingly complex changes that swept the world during the years that followed the surrender of Germany and Japan. The 1950s was not a golden age; it was neither the best of times nor the worst of times. Reform continued, but there was also reaction and a failure to respond intelligently and effectively to many of the most pressing problems of the day. It was a time of promise and hope, but the 1950s was also characterized by fear, anxiety, repression, and missed opportunities.

During the 1950s Republicans and Democrats alike moved away from the New Deal's emphasis on change and experimentation to a defense of the established order and a celebration of the virtues of consensus and conformity. Change, and especially radical change, now seemed to threaten the nation's link with a stable past and to endanger the government's future survival. Following the lead of a number of conservative intellectuals such as Russell Kirk and William Buckley, who began publishing the *National Review* in 1955, many Americans concluded the status quo not only was defensible, it was necessary and desirable. The result was a period, for better or worse, that emphasized the importance of order, consensus, and conformity in both thought and action.

To understand the failure to move beyond New Deal liberalism, and the failure of the nation's leaders to recognize the problems that would explode in the 1960s, it is necessary to understand the catastrophic events that shaped the world view of the generation

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of leaders who came to power in the 1950s. The legacy of three major events—the Great Depression, World War II, and the beginning of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union—determined the character of the postwar period.

The collapse of the American economy during the 1920s not only brought great personal suffering and hardship, it also ushered in a period of angry debate, class divisions, confusion, and uncertainty. While most Americans ultimately embraced Franklin D. Roosevelt's liberal welfare state as the best way to preserve the capitalist system, others joined fascist organizations on the Right, or communist groups on the Left, to express their despair and contempt for both capitalism and America's failed democracy. Whether people wanted to move backwards or forwards, almost everyone agreed that change was necessary for the Republic to survive.

The New Deal's approach to the depression provided a temporary political solution that saved American capitalism, but unfortunately Roosevelt was not able to end the Depression. Prosperity and full employment would return, not because of the government's programs, but because of massive federal

spending during World War II. As a result of the war, the gross national product in the United States increased from \$89 billion in 1939 to \$199 billion only five years later.

When the war ended, there was a general fear that the Depression would return. Instead the 1950s ushered in a period of unprecedented prosperity. The new prosperity was the result of a number of developments: new technologies and new industries; increased productivity; an increase in the population between 1940 and 1960, primarily because of the baby boom of fifty million people; pent-up consumer demand; healthy wartime savings totaling more than \$140 billion; heavy defense spending; the GI Bill; devastation and ruin in Europe; and foreign aid that allowed Europeans to buy American products. Unexpected prosperity, sustained by economic growth, provided a strong argument to maintain the status quo and to refrain from rocking the boat.

Political radicals, who had mass followings in the 1930s, now struggled to be heard at all. As a sign of the times, Liberal Democrats moved to what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., would call in 1949 the "vital center." Right-wing Republicans talked about conspiracies to sell out the nation to the Communists

and promised to roll back Roosevelt's welfare state, but most Republicans, anxious to regain power, preferred to be identified with "Dynamic Conservatism" or "Modern Republicanism."

By the end of the 1950s Republicans and Democrats seemed pretty much the same. Both supported increased presidential power and the development of a strong military state, embraced democratic pluralism, and celebrated the virtues of corporate capitalism. Together Republican and Democratic leaders worked to increase the minimum wage, to expand Social Security coverage, to create new federal agencies, such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 1958, and to pass new legislation, including the expensive Federal Highway Act in 1956. The Highway Act alone would cost taxpayers more than all of the New Deal welfare programs combined. The federal bureaucracy continued to grow. Between the 1950s and 1970 the number of federal employees doubled—to nearly thirteen million.

Dissenters, such as John Kenneth Galbraith, C. Wright Mills, and Paul Goodman pointed out that there was still widespread poverty and warned about the concentration of wealth into fewer and fewer hands, but to no avail. However, they were clearly right. The

**THE WEATHER**  
Monday: Fair tonight and Tuesday. Slightly cooler with low temperature near 34 tonight; highest near 44 Tuesday.  
Wednesday: Fair tonight and Tuesday. Slightly warmer tonight; highest temperature Thursday in the 40s.

# THE LINCOLN STAR

Home Edition

Fire 2-2222 Telephone 2-1234 Police 2-6844

Forty-third Year LINCOLN, NEB., MONDAY, AUGUST 6, 1945 FIVE CENTS

**Jap War Centers In Ashes**

**FORWARDED FOR BLENDS HELPFUL TO HALT GREY SUPERHEROES ASSAULTS**

By the Associated Press  
American airmen said they burned four more forward bases before a strike today on 750 Superforts and Mustang fighters reportedly swept the enemy's scattered islands with fire bombs, rockets and parachute mines.

B-29 crewmen returning to their bases said they had set off a series of fires visible for 100 miles.

**—COLORFUL CAREER ENDS—**

## Hiram Johnson Is Dead

CALIFORNIA SENATOR 73, SUCCUMBS AT THE NAVAL HOSPITAL AT BERKELEY, MD.

WASHINGTON, Aug. 6—(AP)—Sen. Hiram W. Johnson of California, militant opponent of the League of Nations and the San Francisco charter for a United Nations organization, died today at 73 years.

The veteran republican senator succumbed at Naval hospital, where he had been confined for two and one-half weeks. His physician, Capt. Robert E. Duncan, USN, said he died from a burst of a cerebral artery.

Mr. Johnson was with his husband when he died. His son, Hiram W. Johnson, Jr., left San Francisco last night by plane but failed to arrive before

# ATOMIC BOMB

## Released On Japs By Yanks

—OMAHA POWER—

**Griswold Says SEC OKs Deal**

**Atomic Bomb Sidelights**

WASHINGTON, Aug. 6—(AP)—The atomic bomb announced by President Truman today packs a punch equivalent to that normally delivered by 2,000 B-29s.

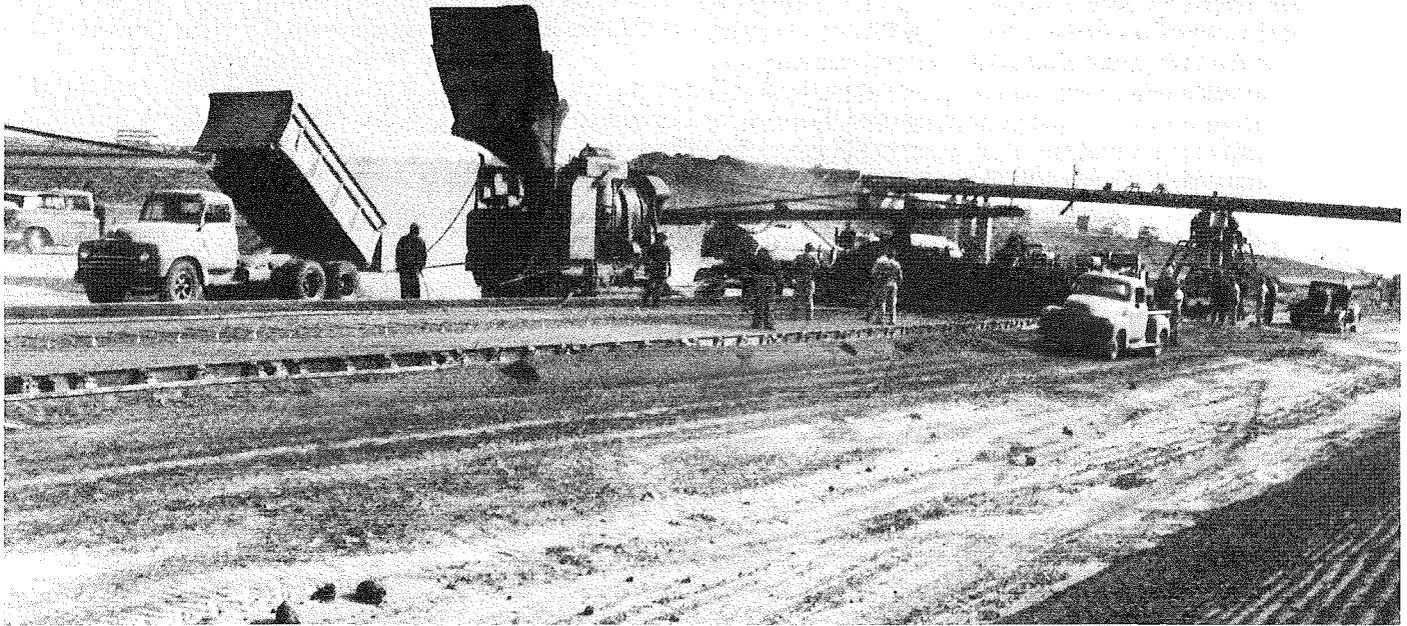
The president said the missile has an explosive force equal to

**NEW WEAPON PRODUCES 2,000 TIMES THE BLAST OF FORMER GREATEST BOMB**

**October 2 Seen As Date of Vote On Bond Program**

**October 2 Seen As Date of Vote On Bond Program**

**October 2 Seen As Date of Vote On Bond Program**



Building Interstate 80. Nebraska Department of Roads

consolidation of the power of large corporations, and the concentration of the nation's wealth in the hands of the few, accelerated dramatically during the 1950s. By 1968 the two hundred largest manufacturing companies controlled the same proportion of the total manufacturing assets that had been controlled by the one thousand largest companies in 1941. In 1949 the top 1 percent of the population owned 19 percent of the nation's wealth. By 1960 the top 1 percent owned 33 percent of the country's wealth; the bottom 20 percent owned only 0.005 percent of the nation's riches.

Still, the belief grew that economic growth would solve any problems that remained in the United States and that class divisions in American society were increasingly unimportant because of the "countervailing power" shared by business, labor, and agriculture. Compared to the lawlessness and violence of the previous decade, everything seemed to be getting better. The rich and powerful were benefiting from the new prosper-

ity, but so were millions of other Americans. Average family income, which was \$3,000 in 1947, increased dramatically to \$5,400 in 1959. The gross national product increased from \$318 billion in 1950 to \$440 billion in 1960. Between 1945 and 1960 the real earning power of the average wage earner increased by 22 percent.

Silence, which could be easily mistaken for indifference, soon replaced political discourse. Dissent could still be heard occasionally, the Old Left continued on, but radicals played almost no role in the public debate about the future. The Old Left became older; radical visions of the 1930s faded into memory. An entire generation of young radicals was missing. Their absence would be conspicuous when young people once again discovered the radical tradition in the 1960s. For the New Left, nothing about the 1950s seemed quite right. Too many issues were avoided, too many questions were left unasked. The memory of the Depression was fading; young people in the 1960s took prosper-

ity for granted. For the New Left, abundance was not a reason to defend the established order; affluence made revolutionary change possible. The politics of economics had come full circle.

While World War II rescued the American economy from the Depression, the war also exposed the persistence of poverty, particularly in rural America, the political and economic dominance of large corporations, and widespread discrimination against women and minorities. Most important, the war focused attention on America's greatest weakness and most embarrassing paradox—violent, cancerous racism. While the battle against Germany and Japan included a condemnation of the racism and barbarism of both countries, the United States interned Japanese-Americans in "relocation" camps, used troops to end bloody race riots at home, and remained silent about the holocaust that was unfolding in Europe.

At the same time, the war brought about many positive changes on the home front. Indeed, some historians

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have argued that the booming wartime economy did more to improve the status of women and blacks, to raise the standard of living of poor people, and to expose the evils of racism than all the efforts of New Deal reformers combined.

More than one million African Americans served in the military during the war. Blacks demanded, through the March on Washington movement in 1941 and other protests during the war, that they be given political and economic rights. Blacks still faced oppressive discrimination on every front, including the military, but there is no doubt that the status of blacks improved during the war. During the postwar period planned protests by African American leaders such as Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, Elijah Muhammad, and A. Phillip Randolph, by organizations such as the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Urban League, and the Black Muslims, and spontaneous protests by ordinary citizens such as Rosa Parks, resulted in important advances for blacks.

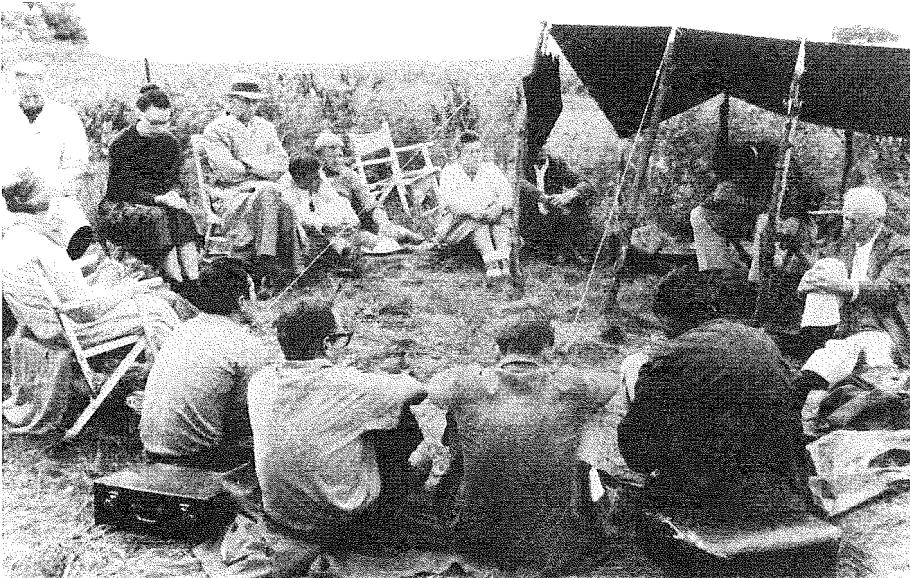
The Supreme Court's historic *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education* decision in 1954 outlawed segregation in the public schools. The Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 supported black voting rights. Still, by mid-century, in spite of the war and black protest, three out of four blacks in the South could not vote; millions of blacks, whether in the South or urban ghettos in the North, lived in poverty. The mass migration of blacks from the South to the North continued in the 1950s, but most Americans were convinced that the "Black Problem" was limited to the deep South.

Women too were better off economically as a result of the war. The number of women in the work force increased dramatically as sixty-five million women took wartime jobs. In 1940 only 20 percent of the women in the United States held jobs outside the home; by the end of the war the number had increased to 36 percent. By 1960 the number of women working, half of whom were married, had risen to 40 percent. Women made more money than ever before, but even more important, rigid role definitions that defined a woman's

place as in the home were allowed to slide because women were needed to win the war. Many poor people, especially in rural areas, also benefited from new job opportunities, particularly in war industries, that came with the entry of the United States into the war.

Many of the gains for women, blacks, and poor people were sustained after the war, but in the long run the war probably limited more meaningful reform. Wartime social change was the result of accident, not design. The war's end brought a sense of accomplishment and pride, but it did not produce a broadly based reform movement to improve the status of women, blacks, or the poor. The ingredients for significant reform were missing. Ultimately the war only reinforced the domestic conservatism of the postwar period. After ten years of depression, and four years of world war, the people were tired of pain, suffering, and sacrifice. They wanted to be left alone to enjoy the benefits of peace and prosperity. Their faith in controlled change, in ideology, and perhaps most important, their faith in human nature had been changed, if not completely destroyed, by the war experience. Optimism was replaced by fatalism. Innocence was now tempered by a sense of irony, grotesquery, and tragedy.

Political idealists, once seen as the conscience of America, were now labeled extremists who caused World War II and threatened a lasting peace. Change was equated with chaos; faith in the perfectibility of humankind was replaced by the sobering reality that humans were capable of unspeakable acts of depravity. The rise of totalitarianism, the holocaust, the barbaric slaughter of the world's military forces, the fire bombing of civilian populations by all sides, and the previously unimaginable destruction caused by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led many to the obvious conclusion that the human race had mastered destruction but might be incapable of creating a new and better world.



In the summer of 1959 the group Omaha Action held a month-long vigil outside an ICBM site near Mead, Nebraska, to protest nuclear weapons. Three members of the group were arrested. NSHS-PC1861

The last major force that buttressed the conservatism of the 1950s was the beginning of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead of peace, the end of World War II brought a series of shocking setbacks. The revelation in 1949 that the Soviet Union also had atomic weapons caused immediate panic. People rushed to build bomb shelters to prepare for the impending Soviet attack. Disasters continued to unfold like a chain reaction. China, our hope for democracy and stability in Asia, fell to the Communists in 1949. Following North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950, the United States became involved in one of the most frustrating and savage wars in its history. The Iron Curtain descended over Eastern Europe. By 1952 the United States had exploded a hydrogen bomb one thousand times more destructive than the bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Soon thereafter the Soviets announced that they too had a hydrogen bomb. The arms race, and the balance of terror that would be called the cold war, had begun.

Our understanding of the cold war in Europe, and the hot wars in Korea and later in Vietnam, was shaped by the belief there was a monolithic Communist conspiracy, carefully orchestrated by the Soviet Union, that threatened the security and well being of the United States. Liberals and conservatives often used different rhetoric and advocated different tactics, but by the mid-1950s their goals and values were essentially the same. There was bipartisan agreement that Communism was the enemy and the enemy must be stopped. Republicans and Democrats joined forces to support a policy of containment to stop the advance of Communism in the world. The great debate about the role the United States should play in the postwar world was closed—at least until the 1960s.

The beginning of the cold war had several immediate effects on domestic reform in the United States. First, all energies were to be directed to the battle



**Mrs. Raymond Baker and daughters Susan (left) and Shara Lynn in the family's basement fallout shelter, 1960. Governor Ralph G. Brooks selected the Baker home in Grand Island as the site for the first demonstration fallout shelter built in Nebraska by the Office of Civil Defense and Mobilization. NSHS-PC1668**

against Communism. Although many worried that we were on the brink of Armageddon, resources were fed to the military-industrial complex to prepare for a possible war with the Soviet Union. There was neither time nor money to advance a domestic reform agenda.

Second, the struggle with the Soviet Union limited debate about the domestic problems that faced the United States. To explain and defend the position of the United States in the world, Americans inevitably compared the quality of their lives with that of the people who lived behind the Iron Curtain. Because we were incomparably better off, we celebrated our strengths and obscured or denied our weaknesses. We focused attention on our political freedoms and on the stability of our social and economic institutions. We avoided questions about equality

and the persistent problems of racism, discrimination against women, and the existence, in spite of the much talked about prosperity, of forty million poor people in the United States.

Finally, the cold war resulted in an obsession about the domestic threat of Communism within the United States. Although the American Communist Party was weak and ineffectual, there was now agreement, among both liberals and conservatives, that Communists, even if home grown, were too dangerous to be tolerated. The result was frequent hysteria, a prolonged search for conspiracies to explain our failures in foreign policy, and the passage of some of the most repressive domestic legislation in U.S. history.

The Smith Act in 1940, followed by the Federal Employee Loyalty Program in 1947, the Internal Security Act in

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1950, the rise of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, and the Communist Control Act in 1954 reflected the nation's obsession with loyalty and the willingness of many Americans to sacrifice basic civil liberties in the name of national security. Between 1947 and 1952 the government investigated 6.6 million employees but was unable to uncover a single act of espionage. Still, local and state governments followed suit and engaged in an all-out effort to rid the government and the schools of possible subversives. The fear of Communism, at home and abroad, united people as never before. Indeed it can be argued that anti-Communism, combined with consumerism, became the foundation of American culture during the 1950s.

For the generation of the 1950s the lessons of the depression, World War II, and the cold war were clear. Uncontrolled change and the lack of order had nearly destroyed the human race. The American reform tradition was still alive, and undercurrents of dissent could still be seen and heard, but it was clearly a time to maintain group loyalty and to support traditional American institutions and values. Particular emphasis was placed upon the importance of

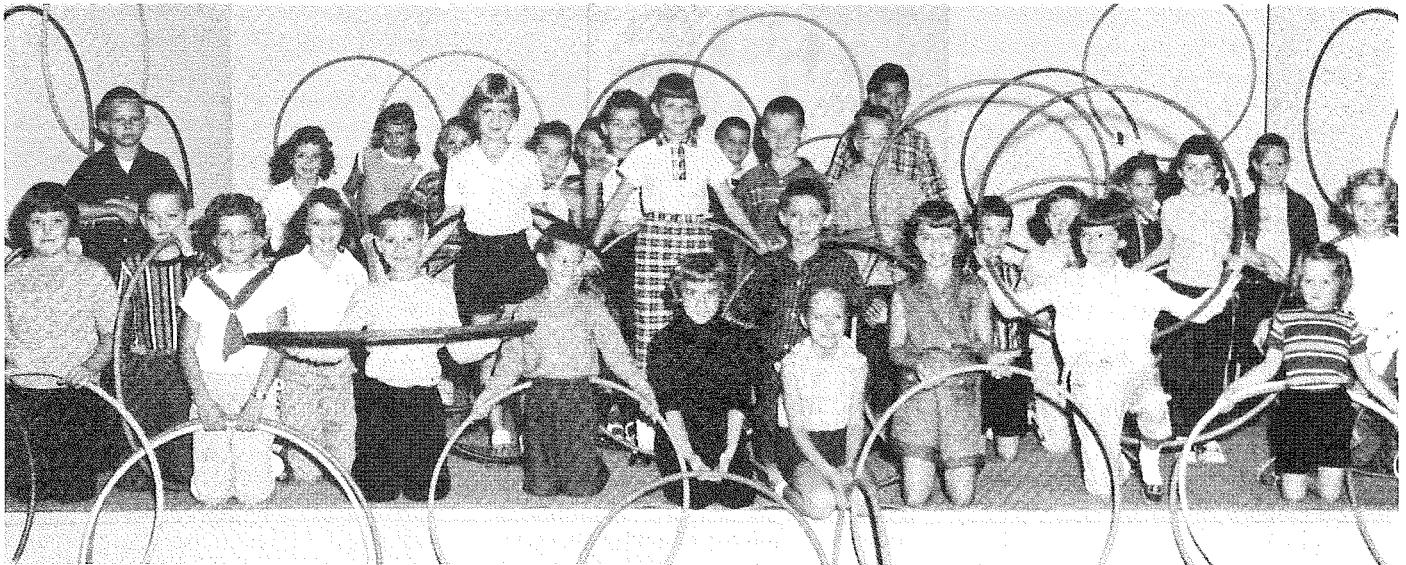
the family and religion. Traditional religion, as it often does in periods of anxiety, experienced a significant revival. Ninety-six percent of the American people indicated that they believed in God. Church membership, which stood at sixty-five million in 1940, increased to 115 million in 1960. Many churches tried to be positive and even entertaining, but fundamentalist spokesmen, such as Oral Roberts and Billy Graham, preached about the dangers of modernism and worried about the moral values of the American people.

Americans were drinking more alcohol; the increased use of tranquilizers and sleeping pills mirrored both the affluence and the anxiety of the age. Tranquilizer sales, especially Miltown and Thorazine, increased from \$2.2 million in 1955 to \$150 million in 1957. The publication, in the early 1950s, of Alfred Kinsey's studies of the American sexual habits, and the publication of *Playboy* magazine in 1955, shocked the religious community. Although it was not clear whether the nation's sexual habits were changing or just being exposed, Kinsey's research led many Americans to conclude that the United States was a moral wasteland. Later researchers

would question some of Kinsey's conclusions, but 95 percent of the males in his study indicated they became sexually active before the age of fifteen; 85 percent had engaged in premarital sex; one in three had been involved in a homosexual experience; 90 percent had had contact with prostitutes; and 50 percent of the married men had committed adultery.

The sexual habits of American women were equally disconcerting. According to Kinsey, only 50 percent of American females were virgins at the time of their marriages and 26 percent had committed adultery before they reached the age of forty. Many of the women who had been faithful to their husbands indicated they had done so only because they had not had the opportunity to do otherwise. Neo-orthodox Christian realists, such as Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr were more sophisticated in their concerns about the evolution of human values, but they too were filled with despair about the present and future.

Americans, with varying degrees of alarm, also worried about changes in other values and institutions that had made the United States unique. One



Contestants in a hula hoop contest at Gold's department store in Lincoln, September 27, 1958.

NSHS-PCO580-3380-58-2

concern was the continued decline of the number of Americans engaged in agriculture. The agrarian image that farmers, because of their contact with nature, were the lifeblood of the nation, was still a powerful part of the nation's mythological heritage even though the United States had long been predominantly urban. Only 23 percent of the population lived on farms by the mid-1930s. But the small family farmer was still celebrated as the ideal man and citizen and the salvation of the family farm was regarded as being indispensable to the welfare of the entire nation.

In 1935 the number of farms in the United States reached an all-time high of 6,814,000; the farm population totaled 32,161,000. During and after the war farmers were prosperous, and farm life, especially with the spread of rural electrification, was more attractive than ever before, but the postwar period witnessed the most dramatic decline in the number of farms in U.S. history. The mass migration was the result of two major factors: technological changes in agriculture that resulted in greater efficiency and the need for less farm labor; and new job opportunities in urban America. In 1940 one farmer produced enough food to feed fifteen people; by 1960 one farmer could feed sixty-five people. By 1945 the number of farms in the United States had fallen to 5,967,000, and the farm population to 24,420,000; by 1956 there were 4,514,000 farms with a total farm population of 18,712,000; by 1966 the number of farms decreased to 3,257,000 and the farm population declined to only 11,595,000 or 6.4 percent of the total population. The rural population of the United States had been cut in half in less than twenty-five years.

Although there were a number of bitter labor conflicts immediately after World War II, and the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 represented a major setback, the 1950s was viewed as a good time for American labor. While the number of nonagricultural workers represented by unions declined by 14 percent between 1945 and 1960 and



Picking corn near Minden, Nebraska, probably in the late 1940s. The man driving the tractor is Harold Lundeen. NSHS-R664-790

white collar workers now outnumbered blue collar workers, the merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955 created solidarity and gave organized labor a powerful voice in American society.

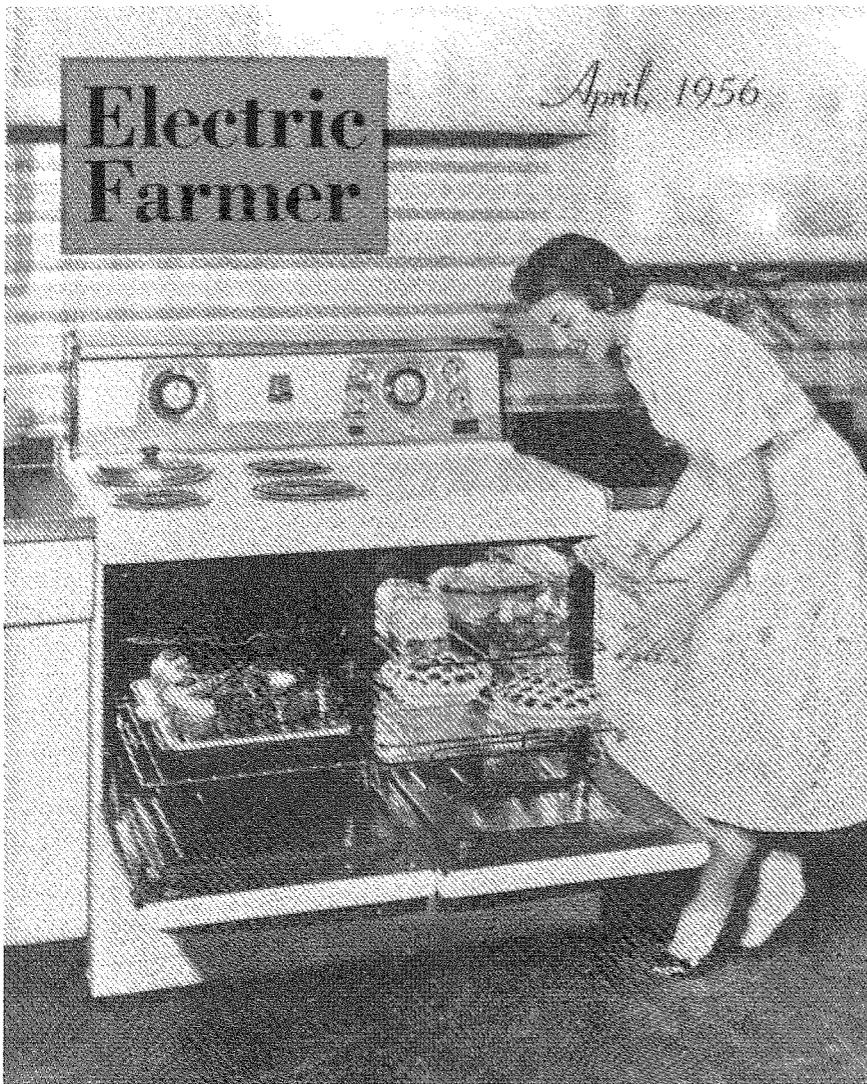
The majority of American workers did not belong to labor unions, but most workers received better wages than ever before. Technological changes, the increasing use of computers by the late 1950s, and the transformation of the economy from an industrial to a service economy would eventually eliminate many industrial jobs, but it was easy to accept the idea in the 1950s that workers were now a part of the middle class. During the prosperous 1920s, before the stock market crash, government statistics indicated that only 31 percent of the population was middle class. By the mid-1950s the government classified families as middle class if they had incomes that ranged from \$3,000 to \$10,000 a year.

The government boasted that 60 percent of the American people were now middle class.

Like their agrarian counterparts, workers were on the move. In fact, everyone seemed to be moving somewhere. During the 1950s nearly 25 percent of the American population moved, usually from the inner city to the suburbs. By the end of the decade sixty million people, about the same number of people who lived in the city, lived in suburbia. For a mortgage payment of only \$65 a month it was possible to buy a new house worth \$7,000, and to leave the problems of the inner city behind. The ultimate consequences of the flight of middle class whites to the suburbs and the daily arrival of millions of poor people, many of them black, who replaced them in the city, went largely unnoticed.

If rural life symbolized self-reliance and rugged individualism, the suburbs seemed to announce the beginning of a new age of interdependence and con-

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two and one-half times by the 1960s. New multicolored automobiles with huge tail fins filled the nation's new highways.

Television revolutionized the way people lived and related to one another. The Radio Corporation of America began marketing television sets in 1939, but by 1946 there were only 7,000 televisions in American homes. The number had increased to five million by 1950, to 36,500,000 by 1954, and to 48,500,000 by 1958. The number of television stations rose from 69 to 566. Television synchronized everything—when people ate, when they slept, and even when they went to the bathroom. At times, particularly in the early days of television, as many as one third of the nation's population watched the same program at the same time.

While television opened new worlds of experience and diversified the lives of millions of Americans, it also sold mass culture and promoted homogeneity. Television also brought the problems of the United States and the world into American homes and made change and the events of the 1950s seem more hostile and threatening than they actually were. The distinctions between the real and the imaginary, the important and the inconsequential, became blurred. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1950s, there probably was more general agreement about issues and the meaning of the American experience than at any other time in recent American history.

Mass culture appeared triumphant. For those who were interested, however, there was much in American culture that was diverse and noteworthy: the work of Georgia O'Keefe, Andrew Wyeth, and Jackson Pollock in art; Samuel Becket, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller in theater; and Duke Ellington in music. The novels of James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Joyce Carol Oates, Joseph Heller, James Jones, J. D. Salinger, William Styron, John Updike, Eudora Welty, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and

**By the 1950s rural women began to enjoy many of the conveniences of the postwar consumer society.**

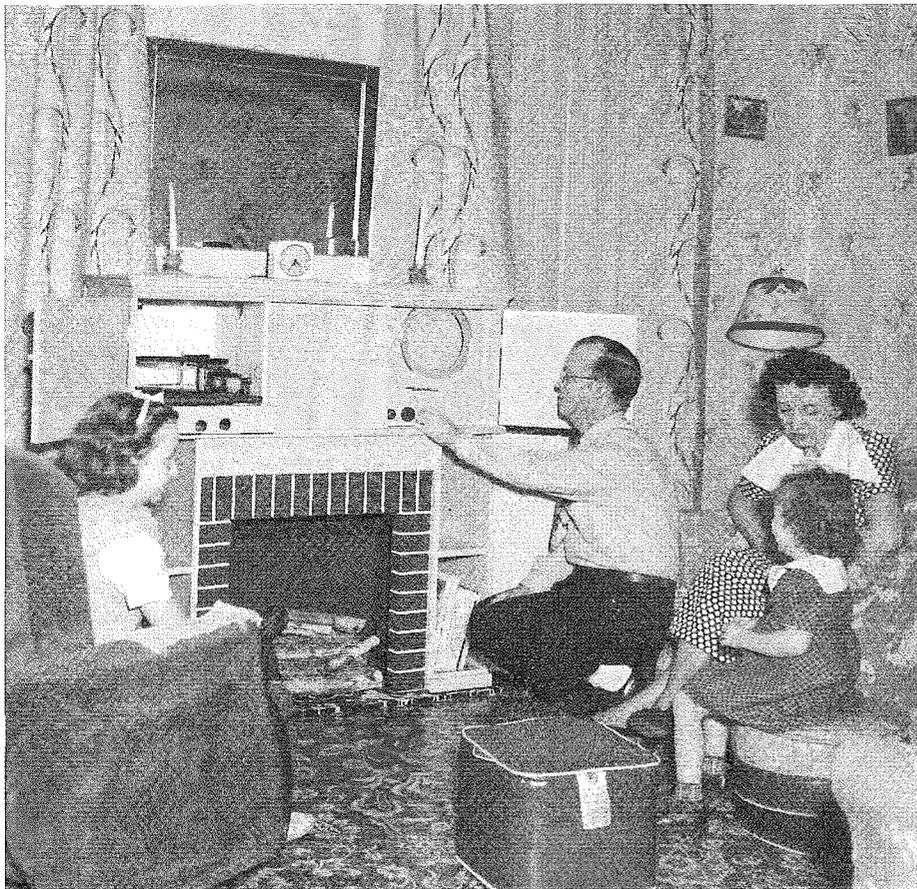
formity. The availability of plastic credit, beginning with the Diners Card in 1950, and the opening in 1954 of the first McDonald's fast food restaurant, symbolized the beginning of a new age of mass consumption and mass culture. Writers, such as David Reisman and William Whyte, warned that consumerism and a rush to identify with the values of organized groups were quickly becoming dominant themes in American culture.

The self-denial of the Depression and war years had given way to self-

indulgence in the 1950s. People rushed to buy more cars, appliances, and luxury items than ever before. Expenditures for mass advertising increased from \$5.5 billion in 1950 to \$10 billion by 1960. Between 1945 and 1957 consumer buying on credit increased by nearly 800 percent. In 1945 there were only eight shopping centers in the United States; by 1960 the number had increased to 3,840. Consumers purchased fifty-eight million new cars during the 1950s; the number of registered automobiles in the country increased



Ken Eddy's Drive In, Lincoln, July 11, 1952. NSHS-M134-19520711:1



By January 1950 the Ward Justus family of Lincoln was sampling the new medium of television. NSHS-M134-19500113:8

Ralph Ellison were notably brilliant. By the late 1950s angry voices began to express a rising tide of discontent. The beatnik generation and poets and novelists such as Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac laid the groundwork for student protest and the development of the counterculture in the 1960s. Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift became cultural heroes of the young, who seemed ready to rebel but had yet to find a cause. Norman Thomas and Henry Wallace kept alive radical political ideas from the past. New radical magazines, such as *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, *Dissent*, *Village Voice*, and *Liberation* began to express the discontent of the young and the dispossessed. For the most part, however, Americans seemed disinterested.

On the eve of John F. Kennedy's election it appeared, as Daniel Bell suggested at the time, that ideology was dead as an intellectual force in the nation's history. Although the beginning of the post-World War II period was marked by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, America seemed comfortable, almost tranquil by the mid-1950s. Members of the 1950s generation had developed values and assumptions, based upon their experiences, that they believed were permanent and secure. Not

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only had capitalism survived, but it was argued that capitalism was the most efficient economic system in the world, the opportunities of economic development were unlimited, and economic growth would solve any remaining problems of the day. Change seemed under control, dissent was muted, blacks and women were in their places, poor people were invisible, the Soviet Union had been checked, we were the greatest military power the world had ever seen, and our leaders were honest, moral, and trustworthy. It was the American century.

It is easy to understand, especially for white, middle class males, how the 1950s could be viewed as a golden age. We were united against a common enemy—the Soviet Union. We were united in our desire not to repeat the experiences of the Depression. We were united in the collective deception that our problems would solve themselves and that time would stand still.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

Among the best introductions to the 1950s are Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—and After* (1960); William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey* (1986); William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast* (1982); Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (1977); Geoffrey Perrett, *A Dream of Greatness* (1979); Mary Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (1982); J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (1986); David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (1993); John Diggins, *The Proud Decades, 1941-1960* (1989); William O'Neill, *American High* (1986); Jeffrey Hart, *When the Going Was Good: American Life in the Fifties* (1982); W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (1990); and Paul Carter, *Another Look at the Fifties* (1983). See also Kenneth Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier* (1985); George Marsden, *Religions and American Culture* (1990); Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (1990); Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (1970); David Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (1983); Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (1987); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (1993); Taylor Branch, *Parting*

*the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (1988); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968* (1986); David P. Calleo, *The Imperious Economy* (1982); Erick Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty* (1982); and William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (1990).

For excellent overviews of the cold war see John L. Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1957* (1972); Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1980* (1981); Daniel Yergin, *The Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (1977); and John L. Gaddis, *The United States and the Cold War* (1992). See also Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (1985) and Alan Winkler, *The Atom and American Life* (1993).

Books on the Truman administration include Cabell Phillips, *The Truman Presidency: The History of a Triumphant Succession* (1966); Alonzo Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (1973); Bert Cochran, *Harry Truman and the Crisis Presidency* (1973); Donald McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman* (1984); and David McCullough, *Truman* (1992).

On Eisenhower's administration see Charles C. Alexander,  *Holding the Line: The Eisenhower Era, 1951-1961* (1975); Herbert S. Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades* (1972); Steven Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (1984); and Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (1982).

Excellent contemporary accounts include David Reisman, et. al., *The Lonely Crowd* (1950); David Potter, *People of Plenty* (1954); William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (1956); John K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956); Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (1962); and Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960).

For books discussing the relationship between the 1950s and the 1960s see William O'Neill, *Coming Apart* (1971); Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America* (1984); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987); Tom Shachtman, *Decade of Shocks: Dallas to Watergate, 1963-1974* (1983); and Douglas T. Miller, *On Our Own: Americans in the Sixties* (1996).

**The Lincoln Star, May 18, 1956.** According to a newspaper article headlined, "3,000 Teen-age Fans Scream for Presley," the star was "garbed in a yellow sports coat with black stripes, a blue iridescent shirt with a kimono collar, black pegged trousers, and hair coiffured in 'ducktails' and sideburns."

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