



# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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**America at Midcentury,  
1952–1963**

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Part One:



**Introduction**



# Chapter Focus Questions

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- ✦ What characterized post-World War II prosperity?
- ✦ What was the ideal of suburban life? What was the reality?
- ✦ What characterized the emergence of youth culture?
- ✦ What were the criticisms of television and mass culture?
- ✦ What characterized foreign policy in the Eisenhower years?
- ✦ Who was John F. Kennedy and what was the promise of a New Frontier?





Part Two:

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**Popular Music in Memphis**

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# Memphis

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- ✦ Memphis was a rapidly growing segregated city with whites and blacks of various classes.
- ✦ Elvis Presley listened to both “white” and “black” music.
- ✦ Sam Phillips, a white producer, recognized that Elvis could sing with the emotional intensity and power of black performers.
- ✦ Elvis blended black styles of music with white styles to help create a new style of music.
- ✦ Rock ‘n’ roll united teenagers and gave them the feeling that it was *their* music (and misunderstood by adults).



Part Three:

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**American Society at  
Midcentury**

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# The Eisenhower Presidency

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- ✦ President Dwight D. Eisenhower inspired confidence and adopted a middle-of-the-road style.
- ✦ He ran the government in a businesslike, cooperative manner, pursuing policies that helped private companies and allowing practices that harmed on the environment.
- ✦ He also rejected calls from conservatives to dismantle the welfare state.
- ✦ Although his presidency included two brief recessions, he presided over an extensive increase in real wages.

# Subsidizing Prosperity

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- ✦ The federal government helped subsidize this prosperity by providing loans for homes and assisting the growth of suburbs.
- ✦ One of the first planned communities was built by William Levitt and encompassed 17,000 homes, without a single African-American resident.
- ✦ The federal government:
  - ◆ paid for veterans' college education
  - ◆ built an interstate highway system
  - ◆ following the Russian launch of a satellite spent millions on education



# Suburban Life

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- ✦ Suburban life:
  - ◆ strengthened the domestic ideal
  - ◆ provided a model of the efficient, patient suburban wife for television
- ✦ Suburban growth corresponded with an increase in church attendance.
- ✦ Chart: Growth of Suburbs
- ✦ Popular religious figures stressed the importance of fitting in.

# California and Suburban Life

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✦ California came to embody postwar suburban life, with the cars connecting its components.

✦ Chart: L.A. County Population



# Organized Labor and the AFL-CIO

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- ✦ In the mid-1950s, trade unions reached a peak of membership and influence, especially in the Democratic Party.
- ✦ The merger of the AFL and the CIO marked the zenith of the unions.
- ✦ Total membership numbers declined after 1955 but new inroads were made in the public sector.



# Lonely Crowds and Organizational Men

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- ✦ Critics found the suburbs as dull and conformist—points that obscured the real class and ethnic differences found in many suburbs.
- ✦ David Reisman said that Americans had become overly conforming, less individualistic, and more peer-oriented.
- ✦ C. Wright Mills wrote how people sold not only their time and energy but their personalities.

# The Expansion of Higher Education

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- ✦ The postwar baby boom was paralleled by a tremendous expansion of higher education, assisted by extensive federal aid.
- ✦ Colleges accepted the values of corporate culture with 20 percent of all graduates majoring in business.
- ✦ Students tried to conform to the corporate values.



# Health and Medicine

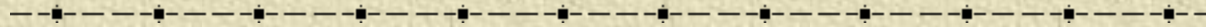
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- ✦ Immunization begun during the war continued after peace.
- ✦ New medicines, like antibiotics, and new vaccines against diseases like polio allowed many Americans to live healthier lives.
- ✦ Doctor shortages, however, meant that poor and elderly Americans and those in rural areas lacked access to these improvements.
- ✦ The AMA did nothing to increase the flow of new doctors and discouraged any national health insurance.

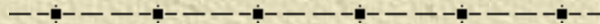




Part Four:



**Youth Culture**



# The Youth Market

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- ✦ The word “teenager” became common in the American language after WWII.
- ✦ Young people’s numbers grew and their purchasing power increased.
- ✦ The marketplace, schools, and mass media reinforced the notion of teenagers as a special community.



# “Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n’ Roll”

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- ✦ Structural changes in the media transformed radio into a music-dominated medium.
- ✦ In addition, small independent record labels promoted black rhythm-and-blues artists, many of whom “crossed over” to white audiences.
- ✦ Established record companies offered toned-down white “cover” versions that frequently outsold the originals.
- ✦ Alan Freed, a white Cleveland disc jockey, promoted black artists and set the stage for the first major white performer who could play rock ‘n’ roll: Elvis Presley.
- ✦ Black singer-guitarist Chuck Berry was probably the most influential artist after Elvis.

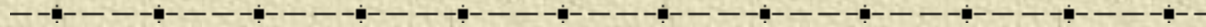


# Almost Grown

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- ✦ Rock 'n' roll united teenagers, giving them a feeling it was *their* music and focused on the trials and tribulations of teenage life.
  - ✦ Ironically, teenagers were torn between their identification with youth culture and the desire to become adults as quickly as possible.
  - ✦ Many adult observers saw rock 'n' roll as unleashing youthful passions in a dangerous way.
  - ✦ Rock 'n' roll was closely linked to juvenile delinquency.
  - ✦ Popular films like *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* showed the different reactions of youth and adults to the growing generation gap.



# Part Five:



## **Mass Culture and Its Discontents**





# Television: Tube of Plenty

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- ✦ Television's development as a mass medium was eased by the prior existence of radio.
- ✦ The high cost of TV changed advertising as sponsors left production to others.
- ✦ Early TV replicated radio formats including situation comedies set among urban ethnic families.
- ✦ By the late 1950s, situation comedies featured idealized, white suburban families.
- ✦ As revenues declined, movie studios sold off old films and began to produce westerns and cop shows for TV.
- ✦ Television also created overnight fads and sensations.
- ✦ Chart: Radio and Television Ownership, 1940–1960

# Television and Politics

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- ✦ Prime-time shows made no references to contemporary political issues and avoided being tainted with communist influence.
- ✦ Television did bring important congressional hearings before mass audiences and by 1952, slick ads began to shape presidential campaigns.



# Culture Critics

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- ✦ The new mass culture prompted a growing chorus of critics.
- ✦ Intellectual critics bemoaned the great “Middlebrow Culture” that was driving out high culture.
- ✦ The Beats articulated some of the sharpest dissents from conformity, celebrating spontaneity, jazz, open sexuality, drug use, and American outcasts.
- ✦ The Beats foreshadowed the mass youth rebellion of the 1960s.



Part Six:

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**The Cold War Continued**

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# The “New Look” in Foreign Affairs

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- ✦ Eisenhower favored a reliance on American nuclear superiority in favor of more expensive conventional forces.
- ✦ Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called for a policy of rollback to reverse communist gains.
- ✦ This “new look” for American foreign policy was in conflict with Eisenhower’s cautious approach.

# Foreign Affairs

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- ✦ Ike refused to intervene to aid anticommunist uprisings in East Berlin and Hungary. After Stalin died, new Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev raised hopes for a warming of relations.
- ✦ Following some steps toward a more peaceful coexistence, the thaw quickly froze when the Soviets shot down an American spy plane.



# Covert Action and Intervention

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- ✦ Eisenhower favored covert action.
- ✦ The CIA sponsored paramilitary operations in the Third World when newly emerging nations sought to recover resources from foreign investors.
- ✦ American interventions in Iran overthrew the government and helped secure oil concessions.
- ✦ Support for Israel was challenged when Ike rejected European appeals to help seize and return the Suez Canal to Britain.

# Intervention in the Caribbean

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## ✦ Map: The U. S. in the Caribbean

✦ In just one of several actions, the CIA-sponsored coup overthrew the government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala.



# Vietnam

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- ✦ The United States provided France with massive military aid in its struggle to hold on to Vietnam.
- ✦ Ike rejected the use of American ground troops, but believed that if Vietnam fell the rest of Southeast Asia would fall like dominoes.
- ✦ Vietnam was temporarily divided at the 17th parallel.

# Ike's Warning

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- ✦ A growing public anxiety over nuclear weapons led to small but well-publicized protests.
- ✦ Ike expressed his own doubts when he warned the nation of the growing “military industrial complex.”





Part Seven:

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**John F. Kennedy  
and the New  
Frontier**

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# The Election of 1960

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## ✦ Map: the Election of 1960

- ✦ JFK was a young man from a wealthy Irish-Catholic family in Massachusetts who became a senator.
- ✦ After winning the Democratic nomination, Kennedy won a narrow victory over Republican vice-president Richard Nixon.
- ✦ His inauguration brought out a bevy of intellectuals who heard him inspire a sense of sacrifice among young Americans.



# New Frontier Liberalism

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- ✦ JFK proposed a liberal agenda but conservatives in Congress prevented much of it from passing.
- ✦ JFK supported efforts to improve employment equality for women.
- ✦ He used fiscal policy to stimulate the economy.
- ✦ JFK committed the country to expanding its manned space program.
- ✦ JFK's greatest achievement may have been strengthening the executive branch of government.

# Kennedy and the Cold War

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- ✦ In his three years as president, JFK's foreign policy shifted from containment to easing tensions.
- ✦ He expanded both nuclear and conventional weapons and created the Green Berets who fought unsuccessfully to stop communist movements in Laos and Vietnam.
- ✦ JFK supported the Alliance for Progress, ostensibly a Marshall Plan for Latin America.



# The Cuban Revolution and the Bay of Pigs

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- ✦ The Cuban Revolution brought Fidel Castro to power in 1959.
- ✦ Ike cut off aid when Castro began a land reform program and later the United States severed diplomatic relations.
- ✦ JFK implemented Ike's plan for a CIA-backed invasion by Cuban exiles.
- ✦ The plan failed, leading Castro to ask Khrushchev for help.

# The Missile Crisis

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- ✦ The Soviets began shipping missiles to Cuba.
- ✦ JFK rejected calls for an immediate attack but ordered a blockade on Cuba.
- ✦ The Soviets backed down and withdrew the missiles and JFK pledged not to invade Cuba.
- ✦ Kennedy tried to improve cooperation with the Soviets.

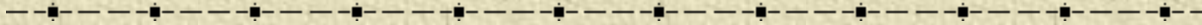


# Assassination

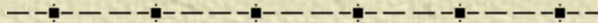
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- ✦ The November 22, 1963, assassination of Kennedy made him a martyr and raised questions about what he would have achieved, had he lived.

# Part Eight:



# Conclusion





# America at Midcentury

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- ✦ America in 1963 still enjoyed the postwar economic boom, but Kennedy's election had symbolized the changing of generations.
- ✦ Media: Chronology