

Chapter 26: Triumph of the Middle Class, 1945-1963

I. Economy: From Recovery to Dominance

A. Engines of Economic Growth

1. By the end of 1945, war-induced prosperity had made the United States the richest country in the world, a preeminence that would continue unchallenged for twenty years.
2. American economic leadership abroad translated into affluence at home; domestic prosperity benefited a wider segment of society than anyone had thought possible in the dark days of the Great Depression.
3. A meeting in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, established the U.S. dollar as the capitalist world's principal reserve currency and resulted in the creation of two global institutions – the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
4. The World Bank provided private loans for the reconstruction of war-torn Europe as well as for the development of Third World countries, and the IMF was designed to stabilize the value of currencies, thereby helping to guide the world economy after the war.
5. A second linchpin of postwar prosperity was defense spending. The military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower identified in his 1961 Farewell Address had its roots in the business-government partnerships of the world wars. But unlike after World War I, the massive commitment of government dollars for defense continued after 1945.
6. As permanent mobilization took hold, science, industry, and the federal government became increasingly intertwined. According to the National Science Foundation, federal money underwrote 90 percent of the cost of research on aviation and space, 65 percent of that on electricity and electronics, 42 percent of that on scientific instruments, and 24 percent of that on automobiles.
7. In response to the Soviet Union launching *Sputnik* in 1957, the United States accelerated its focus on the Cold War space-race. Eisenhower funneled millions of dollars into new college scholarships and university research in science and technology.
8. By the early 1960s, perhaps one in seven Americans owed his or her job to the military-industrial complex. But increased military spending also limited the resources for domestic social needs.
9. For more than half a century, American enterprise had favored the consolidation of economic power into big corporate firms. That tendency continued as domestic and world markets increasingly overlapped after 1945.
10. To staff their bureaucracies, the postwar corporate giants required a huge white-collar army. A new generation of corporate chieftains emerged, operating in a complex environment that demanded long-range forecasting.
11. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), the sociologist David Riesman contrasted the independent businessmen and professionals of earlier years with the managerial class of the postwar world. He concluded that the new corporate men were “other-directed,” more attuned to their associates than driven by their own goals.
12. From 1947–1975, worker productivity more than doubled across the whole of the economy. As industries mechanized, they could suddenly turn out products more efficiently and at lower cost. But millions of high-wage manufacturing jobs were lost as machines replaced workers.
13. America's annual GDP jumped from \$213 billion in 1945 to more than \$500 billion in 1960; by 1970, it exceeded \$1 trillion. This sustained growth provided a 25 percent rise in real income for ordinary Americans between 1946 and 1959.
14. Americans at the bottom of society, however, struggled to survive. In *The Affluent Society* (1958), John Kenneth Galbraith argued that the poor were only an “afterthought” in the minds of politicians. He noted that one in thirteen families earned less than \$1,000 a year. In *The Other America*, Michael Harrington chronicled the struggles of the poorest Americans.

B. A Nation of Consumers

1. The most breathtaking development in the postwar American economy was the dramatic expansion of the domestic consumer market. The sheer quantity of consumer goods available to the average person was without precedent.
2. The new ethic of consumption appealed to the postwar middle class. Middle-class status was more accessible than ever before because of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the GI Bill. By 1955, over 2 million veterans had attended college, and another 5.6 million had attended trade school with government financing. Home ownership also increased under its auspices.

3. For blue-collar workers, collective bargaining after World War II became for the first time the normal means for determining how their labor would be rewarded.
4. General Motors implacably resisted labor attacks against the rights of management. The company took a 113-day strike, rebuffed the government's intervention, and soundly defeated the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. Having made its point, General Motors laid out the terms for a durable relationship. It would accept the UAW as its bargaining partner and guarantee GM workers an ever higher living standard.
5. The price was that the UAW abandoned its assault on the company's "right to manage." On signing the five-year GM contract of 1950 – the Treaty of Detroit, it was called – Walter Reuther, leader of the UAW, accepted the company's terms.
6. Though impressive, the labor-management accord was never as durable as it seemed. Vulnerabilities lurked, even in the accord's heyday. For one thing, the sheltered markets – the essential condition – were in fact quite fragile.
7. The postwar labor-management accord, it turns out, was a transitory event, not a permanent condition of American economic life. And, in a larger sense, that was true of the postwar boom. It was a transitory event, not a permanent condition.
8. Increased educational levels, growing home ownership, and higher wages all enabled more Americans than ever to become consumers. In the emerging suburban nation, three elements came together to create patterns of consumption that would endure for decades: houses, cars, and children.
9. Television's leap to cultural prominence was swift and overpowering. There were only 7,000 television sets in American homes in 1947, but a year later the CBS and NBC radio networks began offering regular programming, and by 1950 Americans owned 7.3 million television sets. Ten years later, 87 percent of American homes had at least one television set.
10. What Americans saw on television, besides the omnipresent commercials, was an overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Saxon world of nuclear families, suburban homes, and middle-class life.

C. Religion and the Middle Class

1. In an age of anxiety, Americans yearned for a reaffirmation of faith. Church membership jumped from 49 percent of the population in 1940 to 70 percent in 1960. People flocked especially into the evangelical Protestant denominations, which benefited from a remarkable new crop of preachers. Most notable was the young Reverend Billy Graham, who made brilliant use of television, radio, and advertising to spread the Gospel.
2. The resurgence of religion, despite its evangelical bent, had a distinctly moderate tone. An ecumenical movement bringing Catholics, Protestants, and Jews together flourished, and so did a concern for the here and now.

II. A Suburban Nation

A. The Postwar Housing Boom

1. Americans began to leave older cities in the North and Midwest for newer ones in the South and West; there was also a major shift from the city to suburbs.
2. Both processes were stimulated by the dramatic growth of a car culture and the federal government's support of housing and highway initiatives.
3. By 1960, one-third of Americans lived in suburbs; because few new dwellings had been built during the depression or war years, the country faced a housing shortage. But by 1960, the nation had added 25 percent of new housing stock since 1950.
4. Arthur Levitt applied mass-production techniques to home construction; other developers followed suit in subdivisions all over the country, hastening the exodus from farms and cities.
5. Many homes were financed with mortgages from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans Administration at rates dramatically lower than those offered by private lenders, demonstrating the way the federal government was entering and influencing daily life.
6. New suburban homes, as well as their funding, were reserved mostly for whites; some homeowners had to sign a restrictive covenant prohibiting occupation in the development by blacks, Asians, or Jews.
7. Although *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) ruled that restrictive covenants were illegal, the practice continued until the civil rights laws of the 1960s banned private discrimination.
8. Highways were funded by federal government programs such as the National Interstate and Defense Highway Act of 1956; air pollution and traffic jams soon became problems in cities.

9. As Americans began to drive to suburban shopping malls and supermarkets, downtown retail economy dried up, helping to precipitate the decay of the central cities.

B. Rise of the Sunbelt

1. New growth patterns were most striking in the South and West, where inexpensive land, unorganized labor, low taxes, and warm climates beckoned; California grew the most rapidly, containing one-tenth of the nation's population by 1970, surpassing New York as the most populous state.
2. A distinctive feature of Sunbelt suburbanization was its close relationship to the military-industrial complex. Military bases proliferated in the South and Southwest in the postwar decades, especially in Florida, Texas, and California.

C. Two Nations: Urban and Suburban

1. Between 1950 and 1960, the nation's twelve largest cities lost 3.6 million whites and gained 4.5 million nonwhites.
2. As affluent whites left the cities, urban tax revenues shrank, leading to the decay of services and infrastructure; growing racial fears accelerated "white flight" to the suburbs in the 1960s.
3. In the inner cities, housing continued to be a crucial problem; urban renewal produced grim high-rise housing projects that destroyed community bonds and created anonymous open areas that were vulnerable to crime.
4. Postwar urban areas increasingly became places of last resort for America's poor; once there, they faced unemployment, racial hostilities, and institutional barriers to mobility.
5. Two separate Americas emerged: a largely white society in suburbs and an inner city populated by blacks, Latinos, and other disadvantaged groups.
6. In the turbulent decade to come, the contrast between suburban affluence and the "other America" would spawn growing demands for social change that the nation's leaders in the 1960s could not ignore.
7. With jobs and financial resources flowing to the suburbs, urban newcomers inherited a declining economy and a decaying environment – the "other America."
8. The War Brides Act, the Displaced Persons Act, the McCarran-Walter Act, and the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act all helped to create an influx of immigrants into American cities.
9. The federal government welcomed Mexican labor under its Bracero Program which began during World War II, was revived in 1951, and ended in 1964.
10. Residents of Puerto Rico had been American citizens since 1917, so they were not subject to immigration laws; they became America's first group to immigrate by air.
11. Cuban refugees were the third largest group of Spanish-speaking immigrants; the Cuban refugee community turned Miami into a cosmopolitan, bilingual city almost overnight.
12. Spanish-speaking immigrants created huge barrios in major American cities, where bilingualism flourished and the Catholic Church shaped religious life.

III. Gender, Sex, and Family in the Era of Containment

A. The Baby Boom

1. The baby boom era increased the size of American families. Two things were noteworthy about American families after World War II. First, marriages were remarkably stable. Not until the mid-1960s did the divorce rate begin to rise sharply. Second, married couples were intent on having babies. After a century and a half of decline, the birth rate shot up: more babies were born between 1948 and 1953 than were born in the previous thirty years.
2. The baby boom had a vast impact on American society. All those babies fueled the economy as families bought food, diapers, toys, and clothing for their expanding broods. The nation's educational system also got a boost. The new middle class, America's first college-educated generation, placed a high value on education. Suburban parents approved 90 percent of proposed school bond issues during the 1950s.
3. To keep all those baby boom children healthy and happy, middle-class parents increasingly relied on the advice of experts. Dr. Benjamin Spock's best-selling *Baby and Child Care* sold a million copies a year after its publication in 1946. Spock urged mothers to abandon the rigid feeding and baby care schedules of an earlier generation.

B. Women, Work, and Family

1. Parents of baby boomers were expected to adhere to rigid gender roles as a way of maintaining the family and the social order.

2. Men were expected to conform to an ideal that emphasized their role as responsible breadwinners, while women were advised that their proper place was in the home.
3. Endorsing what Betty Friedan called the “feminine mystique” – the ideal that “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity” – psychologists pronounced motherhood the only “normal” female sex role and berated mothers who worked outside the home.
4. Many working-class women embraced their new roles as housewives. In reality, they were increasingly seeking work outside of the home. In 1954, married women made up half of all women workers. By 1960, the number of mothers who worked had increased four times. That same year, thirty percent of wives worked, and by 1970, it was 40 percent. Women’s earnings lifted families into the middle class during the 1950s and 1960s.
5. Women justified their jobs as an extension of their family responsibilities, enabling their families to enjoy more of the fruits of the consumer culture.
6. Working women still bore full responsibility for child care and household management, allowing families and society to avoid facing the social implications of women’s new roles, departing significantly from the cultural stereotypes.

C. Sex and the Middle Class

1. In many ways, the two decades between 1945 and 1965 were a period of sexual conservatism that reflected the values of domesticity. Both men and women were expected to channel their sexual desire strictly toward marriage. Although millions of American men read
2. Hefner’s *Playboy*, few actually adopted its fantasy lifestyle. Scientific studies by Alfred Kinsey, a zoologist at Indiana University, in the late 1940s and early 1950s revealed a broader range of actual sexual behaviors among average American people. A sexual revolution had already begun to transform American society by the early 1950s.
3. Kinsey revealed that homosexuality was far more prevalent in American society than contemporaries assumed. The beginnings of a politicized gay subculture emerged from the activities of the “homophiles,” gays and lesbians who wanted to actively change homophobia in American society. Their actions laid the groundwork for the gay rights movement of the 1970s.

D. Youth Culture

1. The emergence of a mass youth culture had its roots in the lengthening years of education and the increasing purchasing power of teenagers, a process at work since the 1920s.
2. America’s youth were eager to escape suburban conformity, and they became a distinct new market that advertisers eagerly exploited, particularly through the motion picture industry and successful films such as *The Wild One* (1951).
3. What really defined this generation’s youth culture was its music; the rock’n’ roll that teens were attracted to in the 1950s was seen by white adults as an invitation to race mixing, sexual promiscuity, and juvenile delinquency.
4. Postwar artists, musicians, and writers expressed their alienation from mainstream society through intensely personal, introspective art forms.
5. A similar trend developed in jazz, as black musicians originated a hard-driving improvisational style known as “bebop.”
6. The Beats were a group of writers and poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac who were both literary innovators and outspoken social critics of middle-class conformity, corporate capitalism, and suburban materialism; they inspired a new generation of rebels in the 1960s.