

CHAPTER  
**19**

Summary

TELESCOPING THE TIMES *The Postwar Boom*

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW** *Postwar America sees a huge economic boom fueled by consumer spending that is spurred by the mass media, especially television. But many find themselves mired in poverty and stifled by discrimination.*

## 1 Postwar America

**MAIN IDEA** *The Truman and Eisenhower administrations led the nation to make social, economic, and political adjustments following World War II.*

Millions of returning soldiers used the GI Bill of Rights to get an education and buy a home. To meet a housing shortage, developers such as William Levitt built thousands of homes. The houses looked exactly alike, but were affordable. Many families moved to the growing suburbs.

The U.S. economy adjusted to peacetime. When the war ended, many defense workers were laid off. When price controls ended, prices shot up. But responding to years of pent-up demand—and using millions of dollars saved during the war—people began to buy cars, appliances, and housing. Soon the economy boomed.

Labor strife arose just after the war. A steel-worker strike was followed by coal miners and railroad workers. President Truman threatened to draft the workers into the army and order them back to work. The unions agreed to return to work.

Voters showed a growing conservative outlook. In the fall of 1946 they put conservative Republicans in control of both the Senate and the House. The Republicans opposed Truman's domestic program, including the civil rights bills he proposed for African Americans. Truman used an executive order to desegregate the armed forces, but his commitment to civil rights helped split the Democratic party. Winning the party nomination for president in 1948, he insisted on strong support for civil rights. Many Southern Democrats called "Dixiecrats" left the party to form their own party. Polls predicted that Truman would lose the election to Tom Dewey, the Republican candidate. Truman campaigned vigorously against the "do-nothing" Republican Congress and won victory. Truman could not get all of his domestic "Fair Deal" programs approved by Congress, however, and by 1952, he had lost popularity.

The Republicans nominated war hero Dwight D. Eisenhower, who won due to his popularity and

voter disenchantment with Democrats. He followed conservative policies. While he did not believe that the government should be involved in desegregation, he did use federal troops to back a federal court ruling to desegregate schools. He supported increased funding for housing and the creation of an interstate highway system. Very popular, he won reelection in 1956.

## 2 The American Dream in the Fifties

**MAIN IDEA** *During the 1950s, the economy boomed, and many Americans enjoyed material comfort.*

The postwar economy was changing, with greater emphasis on service industries such as sales and communications. More and more workers held white-collar jobs in these industries. Critics of the new world of business emphasizing loyalty said that it promoted a sameness of behavior and a loss of individuality as conglomerates formed and franchises developed.

Many Americans enjoyed the benefits of this new economy, though. Postwar America saw a great burst of population called the baby boom, prompted by the reuniting of families, growing prosperity, and medical advances such as the vaccine to prevent polio. Popular culture glorified a woman's role as mother, but many women were dissatisfied with suburban life. By 1960, about 40 percent of women with children worked outside the home.

Leisure time—on the increase—was spent on active and spectator sports and reading. Many activities reflected the growing number of children.

A major part of the postwar economic boom was the auto industry, made possible by easy credit and cheap gasoline. Car ownership—which increased from 40 to 60 million vehicles—was necessary in the suburbs. Travel over distances was made easier by the new interstate highway system, which people used for vacation travel. Increased driving led to more pollution.

By the mid-1950s, nearly 60 percent of all Americans were in the middle class. Success

became equated with buying goods such as clothing made from new synthetic fibers and appliances. They were encouraged by companies that introduced new models, offered easy credit, and flooded the media with tempting ads.

### 3 Popular Culture

**MAIN IDEA** *Mainstream Americans as well as the nation's subcultures, embraced new forms of entertainment during the 1950s.*

The main vehicle of popular culture in the 1950s was television. TV ownership jumped from 9 percent of all homes in 1950 to 90 percent in 1960. Stations spread across the country, and many shows became widely popular.

Critics said that the new medium focused on white, suburban America, rarely showing women, African Americans, or Hispanics—and often portraying them only in stereotyped roles. They complained that there was too much violence.

As dramas and sitcoms moved to television, radio programming changed to focus on news, music, and local interest. The industry thrived, as the number of stations rose by 50 percent. The movie industry suffered from TV's competition, however. To survive, Hollywood produced spectacular movies that shined on a big screen.

While popular culture showed the suburban way of life, other movements presented other visions. The movement was led by nonconformist artists, poets, and writers. Followers of this movement were called beats, or beatniks. Writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac captured the rebelliousness of the era, criticizing the materialism of mainstream culture. A new music—an electrified rhythm and blues called rock 'n' roll—spread across the country, attracting young people. The biggest star was Elvis Presley, with 45 songs that sold more than one million copies. African-American entertainers got increasing exposure in the media. At the same time, many radio stations played music primarily intended for African-American audiences—indicating ongoing racial tensions in the nation.

### 4 The Other America

**MAIN IDEA** *Amidst the prosperity of the 1950s, millions of Americans lived in poverty.*

While prosperity reached many, it was not universal—one in four Americans in 1962 was poor. Contributing to the problem was “white flight” from the cities and increasing migration of African Americans from the rural South to cities. As more whites left the cities, so did businesses. With fewer jobs available, more citydwellers fell into poverty. Another urban problem was the lack of housing: millions of new homes had been built in the suburbs, but few in the cities. An urban renewal movement began, but sometimes old, decayed housing was torn down for highways, and shopping centers—not new housing. This and other problems spurred a wave of activism among minorities.

During World War II, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans came to the United States to work as migrant farm workers. Afterwards, many decided to stay illegally. Many other Mexicans came to the United States to join them. At the same time, Mexican Americans fought for equal rights. In the late-1940s the Unity League of California was founded to register Mexican Americans for the vote.

Native Americans, too, struggled for equal rights. Their position was made more difficult by the government's new policy of termination, meant to end federal responsibility for Native American affairs. The Bureau of Indian Affairs moved thousands of Native Americans to cities and helped them find places to live and jobs. But the policy failed to address discrimination and took away the Native Americans' medical care. The termination policy was abandoned in 1963.

### Review

1. What social, economic, and political changes occurred after World War II?
2. What were the benefits and costs of prosperity in the 1950s?
3. Describe the values of 1950s popular culture and the subcultures that arose in opposition.
4. What groups were not touched by the prosperity of the 1950s?